

The Ties That Bind

Shawn30

Star Wars

Complete



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Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Finale

Summary

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Description:

Given a brief period of time off during the Clone Wars, Padmé and Anakin visit her family at the Lake Country estate on Naboo. A family that still doesn't know they are married, although they are about to find out. Complete.

Chapter 1

Title: "The Ties That Bind"

(1/1)

Written By: Shawn

Summary: Given a brief period of time off during the Clone Wars, Padmé and Anakin visit her family at the Lake Country estate on Naboo. A family that still doesn't know they are married, although they are about to find out.

Category: Drama/Romance **Rated:** M **Ship:** Anakin and Padmé Skywalker

Timeline: I've always believed the Clone Wars lasted about three and a half years. This story takes place at the two and a half year mark. So it's been two and a half years since PA were married. None of her family know about the nuptials.

Disclaimer: GL owns everything.

Beta Read by: The Dark Lord of the pen, Master Anne bows respectfully

Authors Notes 1: At the end of the day life is all about family.

Family quarrels have a total bitterness unmatched by others. Yet it sometimes happens that they also have a kind of tang, a pleasantness beneath the unpleasantness, based on the tacit understanding that this is not for keeps; that any limb you climb out on will still be there later for you to climb back. Mignon McLaughlin, *The Neurotic's Notebook*, 1960

"Varykino"

One of the Nabberie family home located in Lake Country Retreat

Mid-afternoon Naboo

Jobal stood on the docks of the Nabberie family island lodge and gazed at the gorgeous, clear blue skies as a gentle breeze lifted the air. It had been nearly six... no, seven months since she last came here, though it had been years since her entire family was together at this retreat. With the galaxy locked in turmoil over a war she prayed nightly would end soon, a need for her loved ones to gather during such unpredictable times carried a great deal of importance to her.

Soon the Nabberie clan would be reunited again. And that was cause for celebration indeed.

Casting her gaze just to her right, Jobal watched over her husband, wearing a mildly pleasant smile, as he coordinated the finishing touches on the newly renovated balcony overlooking the lake. As hard as he had worked over the years in the Refuge Relief Movement, and as much as he loved teaching, he was a builder at heart. He was born with a love of building things with his hands, and when their youngest daughter informed them that she was granted a ten day leave from the Senate he not only couldn't wait to see her, but his ambition to create seemed to return as well.

For the longest time he'd told her of his ideas for renovating the balcony with Valarrian Bird statues while extending the view farther over the lake to better enjoy the peaceful ambiance. Ten days ago when they arrived here Ruwee hired a small construction crew, and with the Lake Retreat caretaker, Paddy Accu, began the short period of reconstruction he'd put off long ago.

Ruwee's rediscovered creativeness was a breath of fresh air in a spirit Jobal feared was slowly growing bitter the longer the war dragged on. A highly educated man with an acute understanding of how to bring differing sides together, for the life of him he failed to see how this war couldn't be ended peacefully if both sides understood the simple basic truth that even when one side won, there wouldn't be much left of either. War turned civilians into survivors, not winners.

The bureaucracy, alleged corruption, and the Supreme Chancellor's bull-bullheadedness worried him a great deal as well.

Add into that his youngest daughter, a very outspoken and well-known Senator with powerful enemies, who lived alone on Coruscant and worked very publicly to bring an end to this war scared him. She made enemies who had tried to kill her before and would try again.

Jobal shuddered at the thought and knew Ruwee's feelings were the same. At least the Jedi saw fit to send her away again with another protector for the duration of her vacation.

Nonetheless, they had no control over the affairs of the Republic. Turning her focus, for the next ten days she would have Padmé, Sola, her husband and her grandchildren all under the same roof to love and adore. Perhaps she'd finally have that talk with her youngest daughter she'd been meaning to have about the more important things in life.

And maybe even a surprise or two...

"If you add anything more to this balcony Padmé will barely recognize it when she arrives."

Lifting his eyes toward the beloved sound of his wife's voice, Ruwee smiled as she looked beautiful amidst the backdrop of a bright Naboo afternoon. "You're worried about her recognizing this balcony?" he smiled as she walked toward him. "I'm worried I'll barely recognize my daughter. I haven't seen her in nine whole months."

She was pleased to note the happy radiance in his facial expression as she stopped at his side. "Her work keeps her away."

"I know it's just..." Ruwee exhaled a sigh.

"You're the one who instilled her drive and interest in a life of public service."

“But not a life bereft of anything more.”

Jobal nodded as they gazed out over the shimmering lake, Ruwee’s arm affectionately draped over her shoulder. “She’s an amazing woman who I am humbled to call my child. Sometimes when I’m watching one of her speeches I’m enthralled by her strength of character.”

“She’s as impressive as I always thought she would be,” Ruwee admitted with no small amount of pride. “But she is all alone on Coruscant. She’s so lost in her work that her family sees her barely twice a year. She has no one special in her life and that worries me. I hate to think of her being lonely.”

“As do I,” Jobal replied. ‘I hope to speak with her privately about that very issue when she arrives. I want her to experience so much more than professional accomplishments,’ she detailed. “I want her to fall in love and come to know the joys of sharing your life with another person. I worry that she is so closed off and dedicated to her work that she not only doesn’t have time to meet anyone special but that she may not know how.”

Ruwee’s lips curled in a hint of a smile. “Is that why a certain critically acclaimed and very single painter has been invited to spend a couple of days here with us?”

Jobal looked straight ahead, offering no denial. “I thought you would disapprove.”

Ruwee squeezed her shoulder tenderly. “I want Padmé to enjoy a full rich life that consists of everything truly living has to offer. So to that end while I will never push a suitor into her life, I’m not totally opposed to placing one in front of her and letting nature take its course.”

“I knew there was a reason I married you,” Jobal teased as they strolled along the balcony. “Padmé will come around; I’m sure of it. It’s just sometimes I wonder what’s gotten into her.”

The Naboo Royal Cruiser II

The Bed-Chamber

En route to Naboo

“... deeper,” Padmé half-begged in a husky sigh, her polished nails raking over the sweaty muscled skin of Anakin’s heaving back. Hot perspiration mingled with each solid collision as their bodies became one time after pounding time. She craved the heavy weight of him pressing down on her, his strong hips surging his thick shaft in hard thrusts as she raised her lower body to meet his passionate aggression. Clinging to him for life, his mouth conveyed a tireless lust for her alone, suckling over her pulse, his broad chest ghosting over her hardened nipples.

Lying sideways on the bed with the torn remains of her ruined custom-made dress lying on the floor, Padmé was being thoroughly taken by her husband. “More... love you so much.”

“... such a tease,” Anakin panted against the shell of her ear, his mind’s eye providing the wicked smirk he was sure adorned her beautiful face. Thrusting deeply into her outspread thighs, her feminine tightness pulled so deliciously around him he gently bit his lip in an effort to maintain control of which he had very little left. Only a short time ago he’d succumb

to her seduction. As if sharing her with her family for ten days, of which time he wouldn't even be afforded the right of sleeping in the same room with her, wasn't bad enough, the wickedness with which she toyed with him while he piloted them from Coruscant were cause to consider if she were the Sith Lord the Jedi were looking for all along.

"You're going to pay for what you did," Anakin promised her with short, grinding strokes that made her mew softly in his ear.

With the base of his cock rubbing such pleasure over her clit she tilted her head back and clutched him tighter. Through half-closed eyes she quietly replied, "By all means, Jedi. Make me pay."

Padmé's sweet cries filled the bed-chamber when Anakin claimed her just that much harder for her evil transgressions. Force, she was a sight to behold beneath him, so small. The curly strands of her chestnut hair fanned her flushed face and the pouty bow of her succulent lips called out to him. The intensity of his breathing increased while laboring above her, wishing for no more than to never be without her again. She was home... forever home.

The solid thickness of him gliding in and out of her as the bed shook left Padmé soft and receptive. Above her Anakin was smiling and still a bit jaded by the fact that she had pushed him to near insanity. From the moment he took the pilot's chair she had touched him tenderly all around his neck, over his thigh, and along his face while he tried to fly the ship. Her sensual manipulations came in such a way as if she didn't know she was doing it at all. She spoke in a whispery, sensual voice about missing him and how good he looked and how lonely her bed was without him.

Anakin warned her of his slipping self-control... told her he would need to maintain it for the next ten days around her family; they would be closely watched... conveyed the absolute need for a Jedi to master himself if he ever hoped to master the Force.

Standing behind his chair, her slender arms wrapped around his neck, she whispered that she lay in bed at night in the dark and wept while touching herself, thinking of him... wishing her were inside her.

C3PO was nearly knocked aside when Anakin stalked through the back of the ship, carrying a mockingly-complaining Padmé over his shoulder. Once they reached the bed-chamber he kissed her with such hunger and then lustfully tore her custom-made dress from her body completely before throwing her down onto the bed to ravish her.

Being apart for the last four months left them voracious as that aching need had to be filled, damn anything in its way.

Having rolled across the bed a few times while making love in a new position, Anakin held onto Padmé's trim waist while gazing up into her gorgeous brown eyes. The hypnotizing warmth of her body closing so snugly around him, rising and falling above him was indescribably pleasurable. His hands filled with the gently-curved swells of her backside, guiding her down harder as he spread his legs to thrust with her, utterly lost in each other and the moment. "My angel..."

"Your angel," Padmé pledged forever before leaning over to capture his mouth, her hips grinding low and away, riding her husband as she pleased. Riding the hard length of him embedded so deeply inside her she... she... Suddenly her hips bucked violently, her body

stiffened, and then she began to uncontrollably tighten and flutter all around him as a wild cry of ecstasy escaped her lips. She felt his strong arms close around her, holding her through the delirious, shuddering climax coursing through her body until she lazily slumped over his chest. She emitted a thoroughly satisfied hum against his shoulder, her body lax and sated.

Stroking her thick hair with a lover's touch, Anakin turned them over and then gently withdrew from her. She wore an innocent smile as her rosy lips beckoned him, so he had to kiss her that instant, loving her to the depths of his very soul. His adoration soon fell over her cheek, and then methodically down the column of her throat, over her slender shoulders and down the valley between her beautiful breasts.

"Ani..."

"Shhh," was all he chanted with his face buried against her chest, breathing heat there, before his flesh hand rose to firmly cup her breast. The sensation caused her back to arch in such a provocative pose he couldn't believe a woman could ever look so sexy. His tongue drenched the pebbled peak in moisture, and then began sucking the hardened tip until she cried out. He was ravenous, tugging gently with his teeth before pulling hard again and then treating its twin to the same.

When his flesh hand filled with one soft breast, his mouth drew urgently on the other. Her nails clawed at the bed sheets, her head turned sideways tugging her bottom lip as his mouth began to descend her body.

When his kisses rained down her toned, flat belly the muscles quivered beneath his lips. His gazed up from between her slim thighs, found her breathlessly staring at him, and then took an agonizingly long lick of her from top bottom to top and back again. Her backside ground into the mattress as she moaned loudly. His hands held her thighs while he sampled her softest flesh, dragging his agile tongue in firm lashes up and down her sex while her thighs quivered shut around his head.

Her deep, erratic breaths were evidence enough she was close to oblivion. The exotic fragrance of her arousal enraptured him equally to the love of how she tasted. His insatiable tongue exploration sent every muscle in her body taut. He alternated between fast and slow before sucking firmly her sex, sparing her clit just enough attention to keep her shaking above him. And when his mouth finally devoted itself to her pleasure he suckled the small sensitive flesh so tenderly while driving two fingers fast inside her that she came again, wild and untamed, her nails digging into his scalp as her hips pumped against his open mouth. He wouldn't stop until she finally had to push him away as the sensations were too great to bear.

By the time Padmé was even able to realize where she was again Anakin loomed above her, snaked between her thighs. His blue eyes were filled with a lust and desire she awakened in him like no other... there would never, ever be another. He wanted her so badly just by the way he looked at her that it was almost scary as much as it was thoroughly thrilling. Her hands reached for his handsome face, drawing him closer to her lips, and then she softly whispered a most un-Padmé like phrase to send him spiraling over the edge of restraint.

"Fuck me."

Her flushed, triumphant smile faded the second he pushed deeply inside, her eyes rolled back, her mouth slacked opened, and all she could do was hang on for dear life as he took

her... Force, he took her hard.

"Mine!" Anakin chanted in her ear, riding her furiously into the mattress, fiercely fucking her, never stopping for a breath as the bed shook in the wake of his need. He felt her hands roam all over the firm, smooth flesh of his backside, squeezing it, urging him to take what he wanted. Her arms wrapped as tightly around his neck as her body did around the rigid length of him surging inside her. He lifted her slender legs up over his shoulders. His knees spread for power as the sheer agony of desiring her so badly drove out of him in thundering waves of passion. He took her faster, roughly thrusting with a primal flair that saw his climax violently erupt without warning. A final deep thrust and he was gone, coming in powerful bursts of hot wet heat as she clung to him, arms and legs locked in a full body embrace, softly chanting her love for him.

A time passed.

The thick Naclair covers kept the remains of her expensive, custom-made dress company on the floor while the bed sheets were adorned with the enticing scent of their passion. Padmé inhaled deeply, half lying over Anakin's body, one leg hung over his. Naked and sleepy-sated in his strong arms, her fingers drew small circles over the steady rise and fall of his chest. "I never meant to provoke you."

His wife truly had some nerve, Anakin considered happily. Gentle laughter bubbled out of him, eyes shut as he simply enjoyed the beloved sound of her voice. "Liar."

"I do not lie," she defended herself. He quirked open a curious eye, smirked, and then had the nerve to say...

"You're a politician. And as Obi-Wan says they are not to be trusted."

"Tell me. Did Obi-Wan ever mention anything relating to ravishing your wife and then lying naked in bed with her afterward?" Her husband shivered next to her.

"Perish the thought."

"So you don't trust me?"

Pulling her closer, Anakin noted to her smiling face, "I trust you in all things, but alas, you are a politician. Your ability to spin your actions into a more favorable light is legendary."

Mildly impressed by his assumption, Padmé affectionately toyed with his hair. "Regardless of your misguided interpretation of my earlier actions, the end results cannot be argued with," she ended with a kiss that sweetly lingered to mark her point.

Then a knock came at their bed-chamber door.

"Excuse me, Miss. Padmé and Master Anakin?" C3PO was overheard saying. "Oh dear, I sincerely regret interrupting your 'aggressive negotiations.'"

Anakin laughed whenever C3PO made mention of that term's "alternate meaning." The one the protocol droid accidentally overheard Padmé say months ago. She feared the day that 3PO might slip up in front of friends or family. "Yes, 3PO?"

"Ms. Padmé's sister, Sola is attempting to communicate with us. What should I say?"

Padmé shot out of bed like a light, searching for and finding a pale blue robe to slip on and then seeking a brush for her post-sex bed-hair. “Accept the communication, and tell her I’ll be with her in a moment.”

“As you wish, milady.” The unmistakable sound of C3PO walking off faded behind the door.

“Calm down, Angel.” Watching Padmé rush to the refresher to splash some water on her face and then back to the bed-chamber was very amusing. “I’m sure everything is fine.”

“I’m not worried that something is wrong. Sola would have told 3PO immediately if it was,” Padmé explained. ‘I just want to give the appearance of everything being normal.’ She reached the door wearing a regretful expression that she had to vacate their bed. “I’ll be back shortly. Be good.” He gave a nod that she barely trusted but didn’t want to keep her sister waiting any longer.

Padmé quickly made her way through the new, larger version of the starship that was destroyed years ago in an assassination attempt on her life. She took a long deep breath, brushed her hair back and then assumed the pilot’s chair. A clear image of her dear sister greeted her. “To what do I owe this early communication?”

“Can’t a sister say hello before you land? Or is that some new family rule I am unaware of?”

“It’s uncommon for you to make interstellar communications is all.”

“So I can’t surprise you from time to time?”

Padmé arched a whimsical brow. “It would be a first.”

“That’s interesting coming from the Queen of predictability,” Sola playfully accused.

“Former Queen, dear sister.” Padmé sincerely looked forward to being with Sola again as it had been far too long since they spent time together. Gazing at her now, she found Sola gazing back at her just the same, only more closely.

“Padmé, you are practically glowing,” Sola complimented her clearly surprised sibling. “You look like a new woman. Whatever is happening with you?”

Padmé smiled. She had mastered the art of calm and poise amid probing questions years ago. “I’ve just been getting more sleep lately, that’s all. Thank you though. And you look lovely as always.”

“Chasing Pooja and Ryoo keeps me young. Those little yard rats run me ragged.” Sola paused for a moment and appeared to look around and behind Padmé. “Where are Dormé and Moteé? Aren’t they accompanying you?”

Padmé shook her head. “No, not this time I’m afraid. I gave them time off for their own families or whatever they might want to pursue. They have so very little time for their own lives so this was my way of repaying them.”

“How about Captain Typho?”

“The same,” Padmé replied to her sister’s now curious expression. “I have my Jedi protector with me, and I am expecting no trouble nor have I suffered any threats to my life in quite some time. I’ll be safe, I promise.”

As much as Padmé’s explanation made sense, it was still strange for some reason. Sola couldn’t help feeling something was amiss. Something elusive, just tickling the back of her mind. Why would her sister travel alone with a sole Jedi and none of her staff, who had accompanied her to Naboo on every trip she’d made for years? Especially since all of them hailed from Naboo as well.

And then it all became crystal clear to Sola when a very handsome, very familiar Jedi Knight entered the cockpit area wearing what could only be described as a daring smile and took the chair beside Padmé. Her sister looked at him for a brief instant... mortified, and then her cool facade slipped back into place.

“I hope I’m not interrupting?” Anakin asked while Padmé stared daggers at him. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Sola. I hope you’re well.”

“I’m fine, Anakin,” she nodded gracefully, now keeping her own cool. “You look quite well yourself. I know this is long belated, but congratulations on your Knighthood.”

“Thank you, milady,” he replied.

“The ‘Hero Without Fear’,” rolled off Sola’s tongue, now ignoring her eerily quiet sister to focus on the Jedi. “We’re treated to your heroic exploits on HoloNet almost every night. My children are going to go crazy when they see you.”

“The HoloNet portrays everyone bigger than life,” he bashfully alluded.

“Well you are doing a great and important service to the Republic during these trying times. I sincerely hope you enjoy your stay on Naboo.” Looking to her sister, Sola noticed that she (looked like she) might not be breathing. Could it be that she knew it made absolutely no sense at all that the hero of the war was given the task of accompanying a senator on a vacation to see her family? Any Jedi or more likely a Padawan would have been given the task. But Anakin... oh no, there was much more going on than met the eye. And she was going to discover exactly what it was. “Sister, I just wanted to make sure you were on your way and not taken back at the last minute by some business in the Senate. The family can’t wait until you arrive.”

Breathing again, Padmé smiled. “I can’t wait to see all of you too. We should arrive in a couple of hours. I’ll see you then.”

“Take care, Padmé. You too, Anakin. I think the next ten days are going to be most enjoyable... for so many reasons. Goodbye.”

Sola’s communication feed ended, and as soon as it did Padmé kicked Anakin. Hard.

“Hey, what was that for?”

“Oh please. I didn’t kick you that hard. And why did you come up here? I had an explanation already planned for why you’re with me, and now they will know long before we land. There’ll be even more questions and eyes on us all trip long.”

“Everything will be fine, Angel.” Rubbing the ache in his shin, Anakin gave her a look. “And I think Sola has suspected something for a long time.”)

“As do I, but now you’ve made her even more curious than she already was,” Padmé said. “But she has no evidence and will mercilessly tease me no matter what she suspects.”

Despite her frustration with him, she still looked far too beautiful when she was mad. “Is the autopilot still engaged?”

“Yes.”

The sounds of a giggling senator being carried back to the bed-chambers for more “aggressive negotiations” filled the starship.

The End of Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Title: "The Ties That Bind" (2/?)

Written By: Shawn

Summary: Surprises abound upon Anakin and Padmé's arrival at the Lake Country for a ten day vacation with her family. The only question is who will be shocked more? The Nabberrie's or the Skywalkers?

Category: Drama/Romance

Rated: M

Ship: Anakin and Padmé Skywalker

Timeline: I've always believed the Clone Wars lasted about three and a half years. This story takes place at the two and a half year mark. So it's been two and a half years since PA were married. None of her family know about the nuptials.

Disclaimer: GL owns everything.

Beta Read by: The Dark Lord of the pen, Master Anne bows respectfully

Authors Notes 1: At the end of the day life is all about family.

Authors Notes 2: I'm no longer sure how many chapters it will take to finish this story, but I doubt more than five. For now I shall leave it as a question mark.

There are no secrets better kept than the secrets that everybody guesses. -George Bernard Shaw

"Varykino" The Nabberrie family home located in Lake Country Retreat

Newly built private starship landing platform

Evening time Naboo

Naboo's three moons slowly revealed themselves in the darkening skies as bright daylight gradually waned into nightfall. The Naboo Royal Cruiser II, Padmé's official shimmering-reflective starship, extended its tri-landing gear onto a small deck, softly docking. A few feet away, the entire Nabberrie family impatiently waited for sight of the last remaining member of their family that would make them whole again.

Sola stood with her husband Darred Janren, their two daughters, Pooja and her older sister Ryoo, eagerly rocking back and forth in front of them. She felt such anticipation not only for seeing her dearly missed sister again but for the mystery she anticipated solving at long last.

There were secrets arriving with Padmé today. Secrets she intended to uncover the truth of, all the while enjoying her younger sibling's maneuvering around their parents and the questions to come.

Especially over her Jedi traveling companion and, in Sola's expert estimation, her sister's lover.

Yes, the next ten days were going to be so much fun.

When the landing ramp finally descended Padmé all but ran off the ship toward her family. She quickly bent down and scooped up both Pooja and Ryoo, who had taken off as soon as they saw her. She adorned their cheeks with loving kisses. "I have missed you two so much; you have no idea."

"We missed you too auntie Padmé," Pooja was so excited to say, her arm looked around Padmé's neck. "Did you bring us presents?"

"Pooja!" Ryoo quickly admonished her younger sister. "Mom said we shouldn't expect presents just because auntie is here."

"Sorry," Pooja added in an apologetic tone, to which Padmé laughed and kissed the child again.

"I brought gifts for both of you," Padmé announced, causing both girls to cheer in her arms. "I would never come without gifts, but that'll be our little secret, okay?" Both girls nodded as she sat them on the ground.

"Dear, you look stunning," Jobal declared upon holding her daughter again, clutching her tightly, and then pressing a kiss to her brow. "Coruscant for once must be doing you well."

No, but Anakin sure was, Padmé confessed to herself and hoped she wasn't blushing. "I'm fine mother. Thank you. And you're as beautiful as ever." Further laughter was heard behind them when R2-D2 exited the ship as the children raced toward the droid and actually hugged him. He made some beeps and chirps they interpreted as a greeting and then graced a mildly perturbed C-3PO with the same.

"Father, how I've missed you." Padmé wrapped her arms tight around Ruwee, who returned the favor, so pleased to see her again. With the galaxy in such turmoil and the danger surrounding her history as Senator, each and every time she was with him again he silently praised the Force as he did now.

Ruwee stood back to look at his daughter. She was far lovelier than he remembered, effortlessly conveying maturity, charm, and beauty. A new found confidence shone in her warm brown eyes, as if she were older than her years. She had changed, and yet he knew himself the days they lived in changed them all. "Padmé, my sweet," as he had always called her as a child. "I am whole again," he said upon caressing her cheek.

Padmé slipped back into his arms for another hug just to enjoy the feel of his embrace. Oh how she missed her family. To be reunited with them again was a blessing. "As am I, father." She stood before him, beaming. "You look well. In fact, it looks like there is less of you," she smiled over his shoulder at Jobal and Sola.

“Well, your mother’s been bugging me for some time to, as she put it, act my age in relation to eating and working out. It seems to be paying off,” she smiled at his wife.

Padmé walked toward Sola, who seemed to be wearing something of a mischievous expression on her face. Before she could speak the elder Naberrie sibling called out...

“Well look who we have here everyone. It seems Padmé has brought an old friend with her.”

Something of a hush fell over the reunion as all eyes scanned the tall, striking individual standing at the bottom of the landing ramp. Anakin seemed a bit apprehensive by such attention and gave a little wave of sorts. The children’s eyes widened upon seeing “The Hero Without Fear” live and in the flesh before them.

“Yes, Anakin is accompanying me on this trip,” Padmé quickly noted, her voice filled with carefree mirth and calm. “My handmaidens and security have been given time off to pursue their own lives. Anakin was given time away from the war, and he so loved Naboo the last time he was here. He offered to provide security for me while I offered free room and board, as well as my mother’s home cooked meals.” Her explanation went over very well, eliciting smiles and handshakes for Anakin as he walked forward with their bags in hand.

Sola simply smirked, vastly impressed by her sister as she hugged her husband.

Having not expected this, nonetheless Ruwee felt luck was on his and Jobal’s side now that Anakin was here. Walking towards the Jedi, he extended a firm, respectful handshake. My, how he had changed in two and a half years. He appeared taller, more world-weary, and more far more imposing than the young man he met the first time. “It is my pleasure to extend our home to you, Knight Skywalker. I have the utmost respect for your efforts during these trying times.”

“Thank you, Mr. Naberrie. I appreciate your hospitality.”

“Ruwee, my friend.”

“Anakin, if you will.” Ruwee bowed and then placed a hand on his back, guiding him behind the family as they left the landing deck behind.

Pooja glanced over her shoulder a couple times while keeping up with her auntie, who was carrying on a conversation with her dad over him growing a beard. “Auntie Padmé, is Anakin your friend?”

“Why yes, dear. He’s a very close friend.” Children were far more perceptive than most adults gave them credit for. Padmé quietly hoped Pooja would be satisfied with her answer.

“Is he your good friend?”

Padmé nodded, “Yes, he is.”

“Does Anakin ever let you play with his lightsaber?”

While Padmé turned crimson red, Sola seemed to choke on something or burst out loudly while her husband looked on curiously enough. The good Senator scooped up her niece again and began tickling her to ward off any more questions and remove any tension they might

pick up from her. “Anakin’s lightsaber belongs to him. Jedi don’t allow anyone to play with it.”

Pooja looked at the object of her curiosity on Anakin’s hip and then noted. “It looks almost too big for me to grab. Do you think it would be too big for you to handle Auntie Padmé?”

Sola thought this was better than every movie the HoloNet ever aired as her sister, and a slightly snickering Jedi behind them, seemed caught in the web of a child’s innocence. Alas, this was more than enough evidence to satisfy her assumptions for the time being. “Child, hush. You can talk Padmé’s ear off tomorrow.”

“Okay, mom.”

Walking behind the women, Ruwee kindly whispered to Anakin out of their earshot, “I may have need of your particular talents in the way of perception. I would not trouble you if I wasn’t concerned.”

Anything he could do for Padmé’s father was a welcome task to Anakin as one day he hoped to have a close relationship with him when all the secrets were behind them. This was a golden opportunity to perhaps build a bond with his unsuspecting father-in-law. “I am at your disposal, sir. How may I help you?”

“There are two surprise guests arriving tomorrow evening, and I am curious as to their true intentions. I do not possess the absolute faith in people as my wife does, and I would greatly value your opinion on what you might pick up from them.”

“I don’t think that would be a problem at all,” Anakin was pleased to offer, now looking forward to aiding Ruwee any way that he could.

“Thank you, Anakin. And I’m sure Padmé will someday thank you as well.”

Anakin wasn’t sure what he meant by that. Just what was he getting himself into?

The regal elegance of twin spiraling Norsa-marble pillars greeted Anakin, Padmé, Sola, and Jobal upon reaching the apex of the winding Kyslian wood staircase. Now on the fourth floor, they took a moment to gaze down at the newly built Garcian green-rose decorated interior stone courtyard, complimented by its bright glass mosaics and a majestic waterfall fountain.

While admiring the many renovations her father’s been working on for quite some time, Padmé felt so at home being here again. Many of her most cherished memories as a child could be traced to this estate. Sharing secrets with her sister by candlelight when they were supposed to be asleep came to mind with a fond smile. Chasing her father across the beautiful seemingly-endless rolling plains and the small island she would swim out to everyday with her friends just for the fun of it. Yes, she was home again. And with Anakin by her side, never mind their veiled circumstances, this was absolutely perfect.

Coming around his side, Jobal gently brushed Anakin’s forearm, drawing his attention. “Knight Skywalker...”

“Please, call me Anakin,” he offered in a polite tone while carrying Padmé’s bags and the small satchel he traveled with.

Jobal gave an appreciative nod. “Anakin, I know little of what you’ve seen during the war and can only imagine what things of that nature can do to a person. I just want you to know that I am sincerely honored to have you in my home as I hold such respect for the Jedi, and for you in particular. Your reputation for bravery and service to the Republic precedes you.”

The ghost of a prideful expression flashed over his beloved wife’s face. If only he could acknowledge it now with the brush of his hand over her soft cheek, rightfully shifting the praise towards her as she inspired all that was good and brave within him. “I am only one of many Jedi performing our sworn duties.”

His humble reply spoke well of his character. No wonder her daughter held him in such high regard. “For the duration of your time here I want you to push the war as far from your thoughts as possible and enjoy yourself. Unless an absolute emergency occurs shut your eyes to the goings-on outside Naboo. Take this time to recharge your spirit. And rest assured you are most welcome here with our family.”

A family he was a part of, though Anakin pushed that slight ache aside to accept her graciousness. Jobal’s aura was genuine as she reminded him of his own mother, giving beyond reason. “Thank you, milady. I shall try to relax while keeping a close eye on your trouble-attracting daughter.”

Though a young Jedi raised by the strict code of the Order, Jobal sensed a rebellious spirit in this one. He was sharper than she gave him credit for while thoroughly unafraid to teasing Padmé in front of her. “Thank you,” Jobal half-laughed, striking a knowing look towards her clearly appalled daughter.

Padmé met Anakin’s sidelong smirk with the same. “I’ll have you know that I do not attract trouble, Knight Skywalker.” The use of his official public address was on purpose as she sought to pay him back for his not-so-subtle dig. Sola and Jobal seemed to fade gently into the background.

“What would you call the numerous attempts to silence your voice in the Senate?”

“Of nor more importance than the numerous starships you’ve crashed.”

“I was shot down.”

“I was shot at.”

“It’s because you attract trouble like a moth to a flame.”

“Do you think I flew the rest of the way here because I wanted you to rest your piloting skills?”

“Now what is that supposed to mean?”

“Its means the Jedi have replaced your starfighter and repaired poor R2 numerous times.”

“Says the good Senator who travels with several heavily armed bodyguards despite the lack of trouble she attracts.”

“Enough, children,” Jobal affectionately proclaimed, shaking her head when they stopped at the end of the hall. These two obviously had a close friendship, which meant a great deal to the mother of a daughter she feared let so few people get close to her. “A Senator and a Jedi Knight should not remind me of my grandchildren when they bicker.”

“My apologies, milady,” Anakin offered.

Suddenly Padmé felt twelve. “Sorry mom.”

Having marched quietly behind the trio, Sola not only enjoyed her mother's utter ambivalence at seeing a dear friendship that was clearly far more than that. The alluring way Anakin shadowed Padmé, nearly falling in step with her as they made their way down the hall should have told her mother everything she needed to know. Alas, her dear mother forever saw Padmé as an innocent girl who had accomplished a great many important things in her life, but not yet a woman who knew the touch of a lover or how to properly handle a man.

Sola was not so blind to her sister's abilities, though she kept her mouth shut... for now. There was more fun to be had in three... two... one...

“We didn't have the servants prepare your usual room, dear,” Jobal addressed Padmé, with Anakin standing just over her shoulder. “I know that you could be called back to the Senate at any time so I had a room prepared with an adjoining door in anticipation that Dormé or Motee might be traveling with you. Now under normal circumstances I might not be comfortable with this, but as it stands...” she cast a curt nod towards Anakin and quietly the fact that he was a Jedi, “I see no reason to change your room unless you have an objection.”

Uncharacteristically, Padmé wanted to do a couple of back flips and cartwheels like she did as a child in these halls. Ever the poised politician, she deftly painted on a smile of indifference, all the while conscious of carnal delights she might not be denied after all. “I do not see a problem having a room attached to Anakin's so long as there is a lock on the door and the walls are thick enough to shield me from his incessant snoring.”

“Now how would you know Anakin snores?” Sola could not help but to ask, arms crossed her chest in a daring pose. Jobal seemed curious as well.

Padmé didn't flinch an inch, “I try to have lunch with Master Obi-Wan Kenobi at least once every couple of months and he often regales me with tales of my good friend Anakin that are far less glamorous and heroic than the jubilant fanfare he enjoys on the HoloNet.”

As badly as Anakin wanted to defend himself lady luck has shined so bright just now thoughts of verbally sparring with his wife evaporated. With an adjoining door they wouldn't sleep even one night apart, much less miss out on a chance to make love. “I'll do my best to keep my snoring to a minimum, milady.”

Echoes of her husband's amorous thoughts filled Padmé with such longing as he obviously had the same ideas she did. “I appreciate the effort in advance.”

Sola was thoroughly impressed with her sister's ability to hide the truth in plain sight. But if her younger sibling was riding a small wave of secret enthusiasm it would have to end as there was a final nugget of news she was most pleased to report. “The walls are actually not that thick, but I doubt you would hear Anakin's snoring anymore than you would hear father's,” she quite enjoyed explaining to a suddenly wide-eyed Padmé. “Mom and dad are on

the other side of your room, dear sister. So unless we engaged in our time honored tradition of jumping up and down on the bed for some strange reason I think all four of you will be able to sleep quite peacefully.”

Just as high as Anakin and Padmé’s spirits had soared into the clouds, that was how far they fell upon hearing that.

“Hopefully Anakin won’t mind the giggles of little girls as Pooja and Ryoo’s rooms are on the other side of his. But if they ever get to loud just let me or my husband know and we’ll silence them quickly.” It almost touched Sola how crestfallen Padmé appeared for a brief second before she caught herself, appearing as if nothing of real importance had been said.

“I don’t think I will even know the kids are there, milady. I am a very deep sleeper,” Anakin smiled despite the disappointment he hid.

After pressing a small kiss to Padmé’s cheek, Jobal offered a friendly hug to Anakin. “You two had a very long flight from Coruscant. I suggest you both unpack and unwind for a bit. Dinner will be served in an hour and a half so take your time.”

“Thank you again, Jobal,” Anakin bowed, and then placed Padmé’s bags by her door.

“Think nothing of it, Anakin. If you are dear to Padmé then you are dear to us all.” Jobal offered a bow in return, as did Sola, who gave an interesting wink to her sister.

After exchanging a solemn glance. Padmé and Anakin walked to their respective doors as Sola and Jobal traveled back down the hall.

Twenty Minutes Later

While brushing her long curly hair in broad strokes before an open window, Padmé admired the gorgeous shimmering lake that surrounded the Lake Country, now lit beautifully by moonlight. A warm, gentle breeze softly caressed her skin, so unlike the manufactured atmosphere of Coruscant. Naboo was a completely natural environment, an unspoiled paradise, the fresh air surrounding her once again and offering a peacefulness her soul had almost forgotten.

She closed her eyes and simply breathed in the joy that the bickering and corruption of the Senate would be silenced for the next ten days. She’d worked so hard and sacrificed so much of her own personal happiness that she’d nearly forgotten what she was fighting for. Being with her family again would clarify why her efforts were so important, but none of those things included her Anakin.

The woman whose true name was Padmé Amidala Naberrie Skywalker wore a mask of shadowed secrecy, forbidden to reveal her true self.

By day she was a focused, opinionated, hard-nosed Senator fighting to find a peaceful solution to ending the war while battling the ever increasing influence of a calculating and far too powerful Supreme Chancellor. One whom her beloved husband considered a valued mentor, which only added to her stress. The daily grind of banding together those Senators and bureaucrats brave enough to speak against Palpatine, even if it were only behind closed doors, proved very demanding and even dangerous to say the least.

But come nightfall she was a wife praying to the Force that she never became a widow, glued to the HoloNet before bed, desperately seeking any news on Anakin and his well-being.

His whereabouts were unknown to her during times they were separated, which were unfortunately quite often. Sent from one end of the galaxy to the other, her husband was always on the move risking his life fighting a war she worried had lost not only its purpose, but the ability to leave the Republic in a better place than it was in before the war began.

Lonely, worry-filled nights spent away from her husband were heartbreaking, as were the cold mornings of waking up alone without him by her side. Was he missing her as badly as she missed him? Was he hurt? Was he fighting for his life? Padmé struggled with such thoughts for weeks and months at a time. She kept busy, buried her feelings, and bullied her way toward her goals despite the heartache she'd come to accept as part of her life.

But not for the next ten days.

Despite their secretive circumstances Padmé looked forward not only to reconnecting with her family but spending precious time with her husband. She intended to be near him each day, by his side, watching over and taking care of him as often as was possible. All else be damned.

To be perfectly honest, she considered with a knowing smile, she kind of enjoyed sharing a secret with him alone.

And then there was a noise...

The sound instantly drew Padmé's attention, though she kept her gaze fixed on the serenity of the moonlit lake. The knob on the adjourning door to Anakin's room was in her own, so when she heard it slowly turning she smiled accordingly. He had such a devilish way of using the Force to his own means, only adding to his charming rebelliousness.

The door slowly opened, signaling Anakin had entered the room.

Sighing with delight, she felt his utter adoration and arousal, as well as approval of the backless, white evening dress she wore tonight. Following his footsteps from the door, the bed creaking when he sat at the end, now watching over her as he often did when she brushed her hair. Forever beautiful in his eyes.

"Love," Padmé called out to him while still facing the window, her brush dangling from her fingertips. "I know that we could have spent our vacation alone and wouldn't have had to hide our marriage or how we feel about each other. I also know how badly you needed to get away from the war, and I'm mentally and physically exhausted as well. I know how you abhor hiding our relationship and how my reasons for keeping it a secret still from my family frustrates you greatly.

"I recognize that this is a huge sacrifice for you coming here where we will have to keep up pretensions that we are only friends and no more. We won't have nearly the privacy or intimacy we'd have if we'd gone to another world under assumed identities, and I'm sorry for that. I just want you to know how appreciative I am that you're going along with this for my sake. I love you so much for giving me this time with my... our family. And I swear to you one day I will make all of this up to you."

The tender smile that curled her lips when his feelings swept over her were breathtaking. The connection they shared through the Force, or simply because they were so in love, gave them such profound access to one another. His frustration over the lies and secrets kept were understood, but so was his dear appreciation for her need to spend time with her family after so many months apart. Especially since he had none left after his mother's death. The sad ache of missing never faded, though his complete love for her healed his troubled heart.

"I love you too, Anakin. More than my own life," Padmé quietly declared and then received the same in reflection through her soul as his feelings were crystal clear to her. She felt an absolute freedom with him, as if her burdens and worries were lifted by his presence alone. What truly was there to fret over so as long as they were together? Nothing and that was the point.

Padmé had the entire galaxy so long as she had Anakin by her side. And she knew he felt the same.

"After dinner tonight what would you like to do?" No sooner than the words passed her lips the zipper on the back of her dress began to slowly fall, even as a tingling, ethereal warmth bathed the back of her neck.

"Ani, I've warned you in the past about undressing me with the Force. It makes me feel uncomfortable," she half-laughed when she heard him snicker from the bed. 'I would love to take a walk with you through the gardens. How does that sound?' Her zipper fell a bit more... Men and their one track minds. "Ani!"

When she raised her voice it greatly amused him. The sound of her laughter a balm to his weary spirit. With a subtle wave of his hand her zipper ascended.

"Thank you." Padmé resumed brushing her hair, ever mindful of his quiet appreciation of her feminine form. The smart girl with the smart mouth who failed to entice many of the crushes of her youth now enjoyed the fiery, wild desire of a powerful Jedi. The Chosen One had chosen her, and while she reached for the respect her education and mind had earned, the knowledge that her husband longed for her body didn't only make her feel like a woman, but such a woman indeed. "Are you going to say anything, love? Or am I supposed to talk to myself..."

The plush ruby-red rug beneath her bare feet stiffened and then began to move backwards, curving around the bed without her consent. She stood perfectly still holding her brush until the rug stopped in front of her wildly grinning husband. "You think this is funny, don't you?"

Reaching for her slender waist, Anakin hauled her off her feet onto his lap and quickly covered her soft, pouty lips with a hungry caress. When one arm circled her, his flesh hand tangled in her thick hair, winding into the curls. Their mouths were ravenously hot, melding and merging in a mastered decadent rhythm.

Shifting them onto the bed, Anakin settled over Padmé, his flesh hand now ghosting warmth up and down her bare thigh underneath her dress. Her reply to his sensual touch was soft sigh against his lips. She quivered from the heat of his thick arousal pressing against her center and longed to be filled with it... with him utterly. She suckled his agile tongue in her mouth, causing him to throb powerfully where their lower bodies met, now rocking against

one another. Her right hand combed through his sun-streaked hair, while the other admired the muscles over his back.

Force be praised, the heavy weight of him felt so good pushing her into the bed, her leg curled along his thigh, their hands roaming freely for the flesh they longed for.

Anakin aroused Padmé with such possessiveness she purred into the side of his neck when his mouth assaulted her neck, dragging his tongue methodically over her pulse. Each time his hips lowered, gliding roughly against her center she longed to be rid of their clothes and making passionate love. Alas, current circumstances and another little factor were against them.

Groaning, as this was the last thing she wanted to do, Padmé gently pulled Anakin from her neck, his breath panting heavily over her face. "Love, as badly as I want you we can't do this with people, much less my parents next door." She recognized his non-caring expression. "They're my parents, and it would make me feel icky."

"Icky? I didn't even know you knew that word."

"I have a fabulous vocabulary. I thought you'd figured that out by now."

Lowering over her soft lips, Anakin smiled despite his frustration. "Who taught you that word?"

"Ryoo," Padmé told him while tracing the handsome features of his face. "Her pet Voorpak couldn't get outside the house to relieve itself and one day did it on her bedroom floor. She said it was icky over and over and over."

"Children are the best teachers." Kissing his wife once more to soothe the ache he felt in his lower regions, Anakin understood how anyone wouldn't feel too comfortable making love with his or her parents next door. He tried to imagine if Obi-Wan were next door... better not go there.

Padmé watched him roll over onto his back beside her, his face wearing a scowl she thought was more than a little cute. He wasn't getting his way. She surmised that perhaps every now and then that was good for a man. "Should I say that I'm sorry?"

"Only if you mean it." Turning on her side, Padmé arched a brow and waited. Anakin knew what that meant. "No, you don't have to say you're sorry. It's alright... for now. But I refuse to go ten days being near you and not touching you the entire time. Trust me, we will find a way to be together. Even if I have to put every single member of your family to sleep using the Force."

The funny thing was he actually might. Smiling, Padmé tenderly kissed his forehead, her hand lying over his chest. "Could you put Teckla and Nandi to sleep as well? When they saw you again they were practically drooling while whispering to each other. They couldn't keep their eyes off of you."

Even the merest hint of jealousy from Padmé made Anakin feel like he'd mastered the Force. Of course she knew he had no interest in their attentions, but she was still a wife and as he was, possessive. "You shouldn't take offense with them, milady. I am a very popular and dare I say, handsome Jedi." Daring to glance sideways at his understanding wife, he found a far less than understanding glare staring back at him.

“Guess who’s going to be sleeping alone tonight? Go ahead, guess?”

Anakin kissed her that very instant until they began laughing around kisses. “My heart, soul, and desire belong only to you. I’m not looking for fans, okay?”

“I know,” she smiled at him, enjoying the silly moment. A sharp contrast to the far more serious events normally surrounding their lives. “I was just teasing.”

“Riiight.” Her playful swat of his arm earned her another lengthy kiss, not that she minded in the least. “Your father asked me for a favor.”

“Really? What was it?”

“He told me that he and your mother invited some guests to arrive soon and he was a bit concerned about their character, if I’m not mistaken. He wants me to Force-read them and let him know what I find.”

“That’s curious.” Padmé was surprised to say the least. “No one informed me we would be receiving guests during our stay. I just assumed this was a family-only gathering.”

“Pay it no mind, Angel. I am happy your father asked me for a favor. Hopefully, I can spend time with him alone and get to know him better, while letting him get to know me better. Someday our secret will be out in the open, and I want to establish a good relationship with him. So I think this is a good thing.”

She couldn’t argue with that logic and would dearly love for her father to see her husband as the good person that he was. “I’d still like to know who these guests are, but I suppose it doesn’t matter. We’re together and with our family. That is all that matters.” Suddenly the pitter-patter of fast moving feet sounded outside her bedroom door.

Then the fast rattle of a child’s knock came.

“Yes?” Padmé called out.

“Aunt Padmé, it’s me, Pooja. I drew you some pictures when I found out you were coming, and I wanted to show them to you. They’re really good and cool.”

Padmé exchanged a look with Anakin, who knew their brief time alone had ended. They kissed once more... dearly, and then he quietly slipped off the bed and back to his room.

No sooner than Anakin entered his bedroom and shut the door a knock came at his door. One that was very similar to the one at Padmé’s. He walked over and opened it, finding Ryoo waiting for him. The cute eight-year old had a smile that could turn a Sith Lord from the Dark Side. “Hello, Ryoo.”

Ryoo waved nervously while gazing up at the tall Jedi. “Hi Anakin. How are you doing?”

Her Force-signature was one he knew all too well. The child wanted something that was for sure. And he already knew he wouldn’t say no. “I’m fine, milady. Is there something I could do for you?”

“Uhm, if you’re not busy and wouldn’t mind, yes. But it kinda sorta has to be a secret. Can you keep a secret?”

“Why yes. I think that I can,” Anakin replied. Bending down to one knee before her, he smiled widely. In only the short time he’d been around her she felt comfortable enough to ask him a favor. He loved how that made him feel. “Just name it.”

Taking a step forward, Ryoo bent down to his ear and placed her hand over it and his mouth. When she asked her favor he almost burst out laughing. He nodded and then followed her down the hall. Pooja joined them moments later.

The kitchen area

Ten minutes later

“Now that is mighty peculiar.”

Paddy Accu, a former pilot in the Naboo Starship Fleet, had seen a great many things in his sixty-four years of life. With a remarkable record of service to his home world’s security behind him, the man who was known as “The Gentle Soul of Varykino” found in his latter years that a quieter lifestyle best suited him. He split his time between being caretaker for the Naberrie family home in the Lake Country and taking request from couples for romantic moonlit rides in his wave-riding gondola speeder.

Enjoying a simpler life at this age allowed him to reflect on the wonders his eyes had seen. He’d piloted small underwater ships around the hydrostatic bubble technology that housed the elaborate Gungan settlements while marveling at the architecture. He’d toured the massive network of underwater caves beneath Naboo and even outran a couple of gargantuan sea beasts in his time. He’d witnessed the beauty and wonder of not only the dark heavens above but the unfathomable depths of the sea below.

Not much could shock Paddy Accu.

Not much except this...

With his back to the larger of the two kitchen islands, he found himself staring at an event he couldn’t quite explain. He didn’t feel the need to scream or shout, as he sensed no fear in what his eyes were witnessing. But the foundation of his thoughts knew this wasn’t normal at all. And still he couldn’t find his voice to tell anyone what was happening.

Twelve double fudge cookies, one after the other, carefully lifted into the air out of a jar in the upper pantry shelves. The cookies slowly floated across the kitchen and around a corner, all while he stood mute watching them. Then three empty glasses made their way off a shelf and out of the kitchen, rounding the same corner the cookies did. Then the refrigeration unit door opened and a jug of milk, without spilling a single drop, just floated away, curving out of the kitchen down the hall to parts unknown.

“Well you don’t see that everyday.”

Perhaps three shots of Hylin wine a day weren’t so good for his heart. Paddy shook his head, whisking away the elusive cobwebs and then tried to figure out just why he didn’t want to tell anyone about this strange event. Surely Ruwee and Jobal would want to hear that... and then he considered if he told them they might think he was finally too old to perform his duties.

Sighing to himself, he could hear the sound of footsteps approaching as the Nabberrie family were about to eat dinner shortly. He quietly made his way down the hall in the other direction.

Nothing happened just now.

He decided to leave it at that.

Five minutes later

A first floor guest room

“That is the coolest thing I have ever seen,” Pooja remarked softly in awe while watching her cookie slowly dip into the cold milk, only to emerge seconds later dripping in mid-air in front of her.

“Go ahead and eat it,” Anakin encouraged her. The six and a half year old bit half the cookie, (no comma) and upon testing its taste-worth ate the rest, all while her sister giggled beside her. “Good?” Pooja nodded happily.

“Make my cookie fly now, Ani,” Ryoo quietly begged, and then received as her cookie descended into her glass of milk and then lifted to her lips. She ate it whole, laughing while chewing. “Do yours Ani. Do yours next!”

“You picked the right cookies too, Ani. I don’t like those oatmeal cookies,” Pooja explained while enjoying the wonder of floating cookies as Anakin did as requested. “The double fudge cookies my Nana makes are the best.”

Anakin had to admit it was probably the best cookie he’d ever tasted. “When I was a Youngling...”

Pooja looked to her older sister, who seemed to not know what the word meant either. “What’s a Youngling?”

“A Youngling is a child who is training to become a Jedi.” Both children nodded. ‘When I was Youngling, Master Yoda used to say sweets ruined your appetite for dinner. Well, his exact words were ‘Evening dinner ruined by too many sweets, it is’.’ Both children quickly shook their heads while laughing at the way he talked. “Exactly. I still wanted to eat all my dinner even after I ate several cookies or more.”

“Cookies make dinner better,” Ryoo added, seated on Anakin’s right side. “Sometimes I think older people just say that so when we leave the kitchen they can eat all the cookies themselves. I think it’s a conseracy... Is that the right word?”

“Conspiracy,” Anakin politely corrected her. “You almost got it.”

“Is Master Yoda the little green man with the long ears?” Pooja cheerfully asked.

“Yes, that is Master Yoda. He trains the Younglings until they are old enough to be trained by a Master Jedi. Then they become a Padawan.”

“Can Jedi fly?”

“No, I’m afraid not, Pooja.”

“Ani, can a Jedi breathe underwater?”

“Nope.”

“Do Jedi’s have to brush their teeth?”

“No, Ryoo. We only brush our teeth once a month.” They didn’t like the sound of that. “I’m just kidding. Yes, we brush our teeth every day.”

“Do you have a pet?”

“No, but I have a droid. Your Aunt Padmé gave R2-D2 to me as a gift.”

“Are there any Jedi from Naboo?”

Thinking over Pooja’s question, it occurred to Anakin that, “No, I don’t think there has ever been a Jedi from Naboo. At least I have never heard of one?”

“Pooja and I could be Jedi one day,” Ryoo seemed certain of. “Or maybe we’ll work in the Senate like Aunt Padmé. She does really important stuff.”

Anakin just had to ask, “Like what?” Ryoo seemed surprised to be put on the spot, suddenly blushing.

“Uhm, I’m not sure. But it’s real important. No one is smarter than my Aunt Padmé.”

“You’re quite right, milady.” Both children seemed to genuinely love it when he called them that. He supposed they felt older whenever he did it.

Ryoo and Pooja ate the rest of their cookies and drank the rest of their milk, all the while asking Anakin a ton of questions about Jedi Knights, Light sabers, and starships. He greatly enjoyed his time with them, as they seemed to adore his company. They had already taken to calling him Ani just as Padmé had years ago. They were sweet, well-mannered children, but like his beloved carried a mischievous streak and were able to rationalize their actions to fit their needs.

They were allowed two cookies each per day, so they decided they simply wouldn’t eat any couple for the next two days. That way they would still be on pace for what they were due.

Anakin thought they’d be great politicians some day.

“I don’t believe this!”

Anakin, Pooja, and Ryoo all looked up at the same time to find Padmé standing in the doorway, hands on her hips, staring back at them. They couldn’t possibly look more guilty. Cookie crumbs on their clothes and emptyglasses of milk sat before them.

“This cookie theft plot, who’s (whose) idea was it?” Ryoo nervously pointed to Pooja, who did the same to her sister. ‘Who aided you two in the plot?’ Each seated on opposite sides of Anakin, both pointed his way. “How could you three steal all those cookies and a whole jar of milk,” she accused the trio while walking toward them, “And not taken any for me. I’m so disappointed in you two.”

The remorseful expression Pooja and Ryoo wore instantly faded into smiling faces as they rose from the floor and ran to their favorite and only aunt, wrapping their arms around her.

Ryoo offered, "We're sorry, Aunt Padmé We'll make Ani go ste... Uhm, borrow more."

"That won't be necessary, but I will not have you two using Anakin as a means to your nefarious ends." The children sort of stared at her, unsure what she meant. "He's not going to be stealing cookies for you anymore."

"But Aunt Padmé!" both half pleaded.

"No." Padmé's stern voice was followed by a dear hug and kiss for both. "Go wash your hands and prepare for dinner. Because I love you so much I'm going to forget this little event, okay?" Both nodded and then turned around and barreled into Anakin, hugging him tightly.

"Thanks for helping us with our nefarious ends, Ani." Pooja gently kissed his cheek.

"Yeah, thanks." Ryoo added without thinking, "I love you."

Pooja followed suit. "I love you too. You're cool."

"And I love both of you as well." Anakin waved as they scampered off and out of the guest room, leaving him alone with his wife. He spun around to face her and immediately defended his actions. "They made me do it."

"Yes, I do believe Pooja is a Sith Lord hiding in kindergarten."

"She keeps asking about my lightsaber. What if the Sith Lord is from Naboo?"

"I'd still doubt it was my six-year-old niece," Padmé snickered, and then stepped into his welcoming arms. "You're their new best friend. Expect them to follow you around wherever you go."

"They aren't so bad. And the cookies were delicious."

"You stole them, Ani."

"And I intend to steal this kiss and your clothes off your beautiful body later on," his voiced faded at the end before sealing their lips in a passionate lip-lock, his arms clutched tightly around her small frame. Her arms circled his neck, deepening their kiss, losing herself in her husband's strong arms.

"Sorry, I forgot my..."

Anakin and Padmé quickly broke apart when they heard Ryoo's voice.

"Shoes," the eight-year old barely finished, her equally shocked sister by her side. No one said a word...

Pooja then slowly pointed and uttered a phrase that on any world, no matter the alien dialect, was a kid's trademark.

"I'm gonna tell."

The End of Chapter 2

Lol, don't let the whimsical nature fool you as this story will have equal parts humor, drama, angst, and erotica.

Chapter 3: Padmé and Anakin explain things as best they can to the children. Padmé suffers through the absolute worse conversation anyone could ever have with her mother. Anakin and Sola's husband discuss Naberrrie women. Anakin comes face to face with the first man seeking Padmé's affection, though she later shows it to him alone.

Chapter 3

Title: "The Ties That Bind" (3/?)

Written By: Shawn

Summary: After dealing with Ryoo and Pooja as delicately as possible, Anakin and Padmé face separate trials as their vacation continues. Padmé endures a horrifically embarrassing moment with her mother while Anakin finds grand amusement in helping her father. After hours affords them some sensual privacy.

Category: Drama/Romance

Rated: M for all that it implies.

Ship: Anakin and Padmé Skywalker

Timeline: I've always believed the Clone Wars lasted about three and a half years. This story takes place at the two and a half year mark. So it's been two and a half years since PA were married. None of her family know about the nuptials.

Disclaimer: GL owns everything.

Beta Read by: The Dark Lord of the pen, Master Anne bows respectfully

Authors Notes 1: At the end of the day life is all about family.

Authors Notes 2: I'm no longer sure how many chapters it will take to finish this story, but I doubt more than five. For now I shall leave it as a question mark.

The family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together. Erma Bombeck

Secrets are things we give to others to keep for us. Elbert Hubbard

Marriage is not a ritual or an end. It is a long, intricate, intimate dance Together and nothing matters more than your own sense of balance and your choice of partner. Amy Bloom

"Varykino"

One of the Nabberie family home located in Lake Country Retreat

Evening time

Naboo

“No, Pooja. You are not going to tell.” Calmly extricating herself from her husband’s embrace, Padmé walked over to her nieces and gently prodded them back inside the room before making sure the hallway was clear. She quietly shut the door behind them and then came around to face them, bending down so she could gain their full attention. Tricky territory was ahead and would require careful navigation. “Young ladies, we need to have a serious talk. I need you both to listen closely, okay?”

“Okay, auntie.” Ryoo nodded a bit nervously, sensing this was important grown-people stuff. She smiled brightly as she was finally going to be ‘in the know’ about something, and she wasn’t about to miss it. Glancing at her younger sister she used a nudging elbow to break her out of her trance. Pooja loved to tell just about anything, and this was big. “Pooja?”

Sola’s youngest daughter pouted, “Why can’t I tell?”

“Because, sweetheart,” Padmé tenderly brushed ringlets of Pooja’s curly hair off the side of her cute cheeks. ‘What you saw is something very personal and private. Do you know what those words mean?’ Ryoo acknowledged she did while Pooja gave a child-like shrug of sorts. “Personal means that something is very important to you, and it belongs to you. It involves you,” she attempted to explain. “Private means that someone has chosen to keep something to themselves. Something that belongs to them and is very important. We have to respect people’s privacy. It’s like how you can’t just walk into someone’s room. You have to knock first. Do you understand?”

“We do,” Ryoo spoke up as the eldest sister, wrapping an arm around Pooja’s shoulder. Though only nine years old she just knew whatever it was they saw meant a great deal to their Aunt Padmé. Perhaps this was even a secret they could keep. “Uhm, what exactly did we see?”

Hearing an amused chuckle come from over her shoulder. It suddenly occurred to her in that very second that outside of her trusted handmaidens and the captain of her bodyguard detail she hadn’t told another living soul in years what she was about to reveal to her nieces. A note of sadness marked the moment. “You saw me and Anakin kissing, dear. We were kissing because we are in love, and we are married.”

Woah! Ryoo had a feeling this was big, but this was really, really big. She felt like jumping up and down for some reason. “My mommy and my Nana think you need a boyfriend before you become a hermit.”

More laughter from Anakin muffled by his hand caused Padmé to glare at the Jedi before correcting her niece. “I think the word is hermit, and I can assure you I will never become that.” Gently grasping her nieces’ shoulders, she added, “My marriage to Anakin is personal and private. It’s like your parents marriage, only a bit different. It’s a very, very complicated situation. One that both of you are too young to fully understand right now. We haven’t told anyone in our family because we can’t right now.”

“Why not?” Pooja pondered out loud while swinging her arms impatiently. “That sounds like good news.”

“It is, dear. The very best news of my entire life,” Padmé told her. “But like I just said, this is very personal and private information that’s too complicated for you to fully understand at your age. But do you trust me?”

“Yes, Auntie. Of course we do,” Ryoo all but shouted. “You’re our favorite person. I trust you as much as mommy and daddy. You’re super smart and tough.”

“And you kiss pretty boys,” Pooja blushed, ducking away from Padmé’s appreciative grin.

So her youngest niece had already fallen to the charms of “her” Jedi. Perhaps it was a Naberrie trait after all. Padmé hugged her nieces close while continuing. ‘Anakin and I don’t want anyone to know we’re married right now.’ They seemed to understand, nodding. “But we don’t want you to lie either. So I want you to remember what I am about to tell you, okay?”

“Okay, auntie,” they answered simultaneously.

“Good.” Padmé was pleasantly surprised how well this was going so far. Of course her nieces hadn’t actually left the room yet. That was the real test. “You’re not going to tell anyone about seeing Anakin and me kissing or that we are in love or that we are married. That is our personal and private business. We don’t want anyone to know about that right now, and we would be very sad and hurt if you told anyone.”

Never wanting to disappoint Padmé, Pooja shook her head. “I will never tell, Auntie. I swear.”

“Me too, auntie,” Ryoo chimed in. “I won’t tell anyone you’re married to a Jedi and kiss him and love him. I know how to keep my mouth shut... unlike,” and then she used her finger to nonchalantly point to her younger sister.

“Hey!”

“Young ladies,” Padmé halted the argument before it began. ‘I also don’t want you to lie. I don’t condone lying, and I won’t ever tell you to lie. So if someone asks either of you if Anakin and I are married you can answer truthfully and say yes. But they have to ask that question and that question only. Understand?’ They nodded cheerfully as the weight of importance being placed on their silence as well as the trust being placed in them seemed to truly affect them. “I don’t want you to lie about anything, but only if you are asked. Otherwise you are not to tell anyone, even your parents what you know about Anakin and me. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Okay.” Peeking around her aunt, Pooja gazed at Anakin while tugging at her dress. “So you’re our uncle now?”

Feeling as though Padmé had done the hard work, Anakin walked over and fell to a knee beside his wife. “Yes, I am.”

Wow! Just wow! Pooja couldn’t imagine all the things she could do with a Jedi as her uncle. “Can you steal us more cookies now?”

“Well I guess I coul...” A polite elbow to his side halted all talk of theft. “I’m afraid I can’t... right now.” Mocking Ryoo, he pointed to Padmé with a single finger. The gesture made the girls giggle and his wife steam. Yeah, he was going to be the cool uncle.

“I really need both of you to trust me,” Padmé felt it needed to be repeated. “We have some very good reasons why we don’t want anyone to know about our marriage right now. I

need you gals to keep our secret and try your best to not let anything slip, okay?" They agreed, even offering pinky-swears.

Standing up straight as she was told to when she greeted people, Ryoo stepped before Anakin. "It's nice to meet you, Uncle Ani." She then wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and was soon joined by Pooja, who whispered something about cookies that made him smile.

After pressing a quick smooch to Anakin's cheek, Pooja leapt at her aunt, hugging her tight. "Auntie?"

"Yes?"

"You have played with Anakin's lightsaber, haven't you?"

Her innocence shined through despite the way her question could be taken were she older. Anakin seemed far too amused at his niece's question. "Yes, love. I have played with his lightsaber. And I quite enjoyed the experience."

"Cool."

"Okay you two. It's time to get ready for dinner," Padmé announced upon standing to her feet, with Anakin now by her side towering over all of them. "Please remember what we talked about. We're giving a great deal of our trust to you because we love you. Please do your best."

"We will, auntie. We promise. You can count on us. Come on, Pooja." Ryoo then quickly ushered her younger sister out of the room after waving goodbye to Anakin.

Exhaling deeply, Padmé closed the door and then leaned her back against it while shutting her eyes. "That was unexpected." The warm, heady feel of a hungry mouth claiming the soft flesh of her neck was equally surprising as a solid body pressed against her. "Haven't we tempted fate enough for one evening?"

"I bend fate to my will, milady. And I will bend you as well."

"Is that right?" Why did he have to smell so good? Why did the sexy tenor of his voice make her thighs tremble? The pleasure of his open mouth loving such wickedness over her throat quickly robbed her of coherent thought. "Master Jedi, we have dodged the precarious dilemma of two very curious children and that alone is why indulging in 'aggressive negotiations' at this time wouldn't be a wise course of action before dinner."

Brushing his tongue in slow swirls below her ear, Anakin declared, "Sex only amplifies my appetite. And I know the same is true for you."

"Enough, Anakin." Her stern voice was ignored as he stole a ripe, luscious kiss from her eager lips. Right here, right now he could lift her against this door and drive her mad... 'Seriously, we can't,' she panted. "Not right now."

Fire blazed in his eyes as he stared into hers. "Give me one good reason?"

"Because if you want me to 'play' with your lightsaber in that certain way you love the most you'll be patient and do as I say."

“You’re so bossy sometimes.”

“And you love it.”

“Anything for Mrs. Skywalker.”

“Thank you, Mr. Skywalker. Now go brush your teeth. You taste like cookies.”

“... Sith.”

“What was that?”

“Sweetheart. I said sweetheart.”

“I thought you did.”

The Next Day

“Naiveness”

A River-city northeast of the Lake Country

The Market-District

Mid-Day

Naboo

A mothers pride.

Wearing a radiant smile on a beautiful sunny day, Jobal stood with Sola in front of a small Solstice book store beneath a shaded overhang while Padmé shook hands, took pictures, and talked with those who gathered in a small crowd around her. The royalty her youngest daughter once held had not faded even though she was no longer Queen, and the people of Naboo still revered her. When she came home her visit, it was an event celebrated by those she once ruled over. The people respected her courage and strength of character while adoring her elegant beauty and class. They had years of evidence that despite her age she was dedicated and fearless she in fighting for Naboo and its rights in the Republic.

Padmé Amidala Naberrie was beloved, considered Naboo’s champion no matter that one of its own held the most powerful chair in the galaxy. Her appeal was undeniable.

Admiring Padmé’s patience as always, Jobal sighed happily despite losing a few minutes to her daughter’s former subjects as well as the relief that Sola never harbored resentment towards her sister. Despite Padmé’s celebrity persona and public office, as well as the wealth and power she owned, the elder Naberrie cherished her sibling to the depths of her heart. A heart that knew no jealousy at all.

With nothing to be ashamed of concerning the life Sola built for herself, an educated social worker and patriarch of her own family, Jobal favored her oldest daughter with equal adoration and absolute love. Her children were her life and as such she took great pride in their individual accomplishments.

But behind her motherly adoration, hidden in the deepest recesses of her warm brown eyes Jobal carried with her such fear for Padmé. Not only for her life, as it was constantly in danger due to the office she held and her outspoken bravado, but more for the way she perceived her daughter had no life outside her work. The steely focus that was one of Padmé's greatest weapons often, in her mother's opinion, equally gave her something to hide behind. Professional accomplishments, especially by women in a male dominated society were something to be very proud of but weren't the sole path to a whole life.

Jobal had, in recent years, quietly considered how Padmé had had no romantic relationships whatsoever. She never spoke of dating or even an interest in it. HoloNet tabloid reports ran the gamut of assumptions from portraying her as a frigid recluse to even questioning her sexuality. And while during a time of war certainly romance wasn't first and foremost in her mind even now the need to connect with someone and share one's life was necessary for all.

A solitary life devoid of intimacy with another person often created a lonely existence hidden behind closed doors. It pained Jobal a great deal to think of Padmé being all alone fighting as hard as she did in the Senate with no one to share her life with outside of it. She wouldn't trade her daughter's reputation or the respect she earned for anything but worried, as mothers do, that her daughter perhaps didn't know how to go about the world of mature romance. She had little to no experience to say the least with men outside a professional setting that Jobal knew or, further confirmed during a long talk with Sola nearly six months ago. Unless her daughter purposely hid her affairs, which was her right as an adult, Jobal wondered if perhaps inexperience and innocence caused her some sort of embarrassment when dealing with potential suitors.

So when Padmé's mother learned of her trip to Naboo only a week ago she made up her mind that a talk was needed. Not one that would force her to do something she didn't want to do, but to simply reaffirm why it was so important to have a life outside of the Senate and to perhaps remind a woman so closely recognized for her brilliance and verbal bite that she was in fact a young, beautiful woman as well.

The joy that could be gleaned from having someone special in your life was so worthwhile.

Mindful of her own inner thoughts concerning Padmé's love life, though not with her mother's belief of a lack thereof, Sola enjoyed her sister's valiant attempt to politely extricate herself from a group of university-attending male admirers who were all desperately trying to gain her favor. They were sweet and not at all rude, but for Padmé she seemed not the least bit interested despite a couple of the gentlemen being around her age and not at all unattractive by Sola's standards. At last they bid her farewell with a few whistles and bows.

Fairly certain Padmé's heart belonged to a certain roguish Jedi, Sola observed her sister's approach with a teasing spark in her eyes. "Please don't leave behind your gentleman callers on our account," she began lightly. "Mother and I could amuse ourselves in the book store a while longer if you like?"

"Did the twin expressions of 'Save Me' I threw your way mean nothing to you?" Padmé chided her sister as she walked in step with her mother down the market-lined stone street. "They were respectful but all tried too hard. I felt like they were performing for me."

“Thus is the way of men, dear,” Jobal added in a motherly tone. “You best get used to their attempts at one-up-man-ship when other males are around. And you are a quite lovely, successful and most importantly a single woman. Why would they not give their very best to gain your attention?”

Sensing where this was going, Padmé calmly addressed the issue before it became one. “Their attention is appreciated and surely doesn’t hurt my feminine ego, but romantic entanglements at this time aren’t on my to-do list.”

“When have they ever been?”

“Mother, please.” Padmé looped her arm around Jobal’s as they parted a small group of shoppers. “I assure you I am not the rigid spinster the HoloNet makes me out to be.”

“So does that mean there’s a man you’ve been hiding from us?” Sola dared to ask.

Padmé didn’t miss a beat. “Yes. Threepio’s a wonderful companion on long space flights.”

Though amused by her daughter’s keen ability to avoid giving any direct answers, Jobal still felt the need to push the issue a bit. But perhaps from a different direction. “I try not to pry, dear. I only want you to have someone to share your life with and fulfills your heart.”

Sadly, Padmé wished that she could reveal she already had the most amazing man who took the best care of her heart and soul. She drowned in her own silence until her mother uttered a statement that suddenly choked the air in her lungs.

“If only Anakin weren’t a Jedi.”

Padmé’s eyes widened though she centered herself quickly. Did she hear Sola snicker or was that the couple that just passed them by? “Mother, please don’t go there.”

“Why?” Jobal dared to smile. ‘I may be your mother and an older woman, but I am neither blind nor oblivious to a incredibly handsome man such as Anakin.’ Padmé’s pale blanch was curious indeed. Sola seemed content to hold her peace though she seemed greatly amused for some strange reason. “He carries himself a dangerous man, yet one can see a tenderness in his eyes that’s tempered in a wounded sort of way. He is honorable and courageous, yet he possesses a dark side that’s quite sensual to many women. He has a powerful, alluring build and if I were younger and single myself, provided he was not Jedi I would...”

Needing to put an abrupt end to this, Padmé quickly stalked in front of her mother feeling a bit out of breath and very alert. “Please, for all the moons of Naboo do not ever finish that sentence. As a matter of fact, please change the topic altogether. I do not need the mental images of you ogling Anakin in my head.”

Jobal raised a curious brow. “I do not ogle, young lady. I appreciate,” she pointed out as she side-stepped her daughter to window-shop a new Gungan antique store. “And he is a fine specimen of man. Despite your close friendship with him you surely have noticed. That is, unless he is... not your type.”

Padmé heard the hidden meaning in her mother’s words and wondered if things could get any worse. And though if they were truth she would not in the least be ashamed of it, she felt she had to lay this to rest. “Mother, yes, I concede that Anakin is a very attractive man. I am

not so immune to his charm that it eludes me. And to answer a question you won't ask outright, I do prefer and enjoy the company of men."

"So you aren't blind?" Jobal laughed sweetly at her daughter as the mood lightened.

Her mother had an interesting sense of humor indeed. "No, mother. I am not blind."

Surrounded by the classical architecture and greenery of the market district, Sola followed closely behind her mother and sister as they continued shopping and catching up on the news in their lives and views on the war. She wondered if her mother would ever truly take a good look at Padmé and, instead of assuming what it was she hadn't seen, she would know that her youngest daughter was not devoid of love or passion. Padmé glowed each time she smiled and carried herself with all the daring of a woman who knew the pleasures of a man and how to plunder them to her whim.

Anakin was the reason why. Sola was sure of it. But why were they hiding their affair from the family? Yes, from the public at large due to Padmé's title and Anakin's duty as a Jedi she could understand. But not from family. Especially not her as they were always very close and told each other their innermost secrets.

A note of sadness came over Sola as she hadn't expected feeling until now when it dawned on her that she was no longer her sister's dearest confidant.

"I'm famished. How about we have lunch at that outdoors Café down the street?" Jobal asked.

Sola kept it to herself that it seemed Padmé could use a drink rather than lunch. Oh dear sister, she thought. It was only going to get worse. "I have no complaints. Padmé?"

"Sure. That will be fine." As they reached the Café and were escorted to a shaded V.I.P area away from the prying eyes of those who followed their every step, Padmé silently longed for the day she could live free and in the open. For the day she could hold her husband's hand in public as much to assuage her loneliness as to answer all questions regarding heart. She wasn't passionless or frigid or anti-social at all. Circumstances beyond her control created this situation and the lies that had to be told despite the heartache they caused behind closed doors.

Having been seated the ladies ordered their lunch and were relaxing as a family reunited. That was until Jobal decided the time before their lunch arrived would be perfect to help her daughter.

"Padmé, dear," Jobal began as she took one of her hands lightly. "I am worried about you, and I feel I have to voice my concerns. I would not be a very good parent, even to an adult child, if I didn't."

No good was going to come from this. Nonetheless, Padmé took a deep breath and hoped lunch was on its way soon. "Mother, I assure you I am safe here with Anakin, and my personal security detail on Coruscant is well-trained and capable."

"Dear, while your personal safety is a constant on my mind what I am speaking of today has to do with sharing your life with someone." She saw Padmé's sudden resignation. The last thing she wanted to do was upset her daughter, but this needed to be said. "You are a young, brilliant, and beautiful woman, Padmé. You have all the time in the world to meet someone

and marry if you choose. But I've noticed... well, a complete lack of dating or relationships where you are concerned. And while I know now isn't the best or most opportune time to meet men I am curious as to why someone with so much to offer chooses to close herself off from the possibilities of romance. And if I am wrong please correct me."

This was the last conversation Padmé wanted to have with her mother as it would require directly lying to her face as well as giving the impression she knew so little about the adult world. "Mother, my work is stressful and I keep very long hours with few days off. It's not easy meeting new people as I am always on guard due to the threats on my life. But I assure you I am as interested in being in love as the next woman."

Sparing a careful glance at a strikingly silent Sola, Jobal inquired, "Others working in the Senate are dating or already married, dear. It is not above your ability to attend a few of the political social functions and see if anyone catches your eye. Perhaps a few pointers on the male populace might aid in your understanding of them."

By the Force her mother was offering to give her pointers on picking up men. And Sola's snickering behind her hand wasn't helping. Padmé wished the ground would just open up and swallow her. "I know how to make myself look presentable and carry on a conversation, mother."

"Why yes, of course," Jobal nodded. "But dealing with men in the political or professional circuit where you must gain respect to be heard has always come easy for you. What I am speaking of is the intimate nuance between a man and a woman. I'm talking about eye contact and flirtatiousness."

"Mother, I think Padmé simply prefers the company of Jedi," Sola interjected as casually as possible while Padmé seemed to fume. "They are quite reserved, not at all flirtatious and... well, they are all virgins."

The ground simply would not open up and swallow her quick enough. Padmé was so at home in the Senate Hall, but place her in front of her older sister and pestering mother and she felt sixteen again. "I do not see what the point of that statement has to do with my personal life. Furthermore, celibacy is not a requirement for Jedi though some do decide to remain celibate. The only requirement is that no attachments be formed."

"You seem quite well versed on the Jedi Code and its relation to celibacy amongst its Knights," Sola simply could not resist saying as it riled Padmé up enough to make the good Senator glare at her.

"Speaking of which," Jobal mentioned in a soft tone of voice, capturing Padmé's sole attention. "Dear, are you still a virgin?"

Not since a certain sexy Jedi Padawan came back into her life after a ten year separation, Padmé thought. Still, she wanted to die. This was just not happening. It just wasn't. Here she was a woman who had on many occasions sexually exhausted the Chosen One of the Force and now her mother was asking her the most personal of questions. "Mother, that is none of your business."

"I don't wish to embarrass you."

"Rest assured it's far too late for that."

“Being a virgin is nothing at all to be ashamed of, sweetheart. Your sister Sola married at an age older than you are now and was a virgin on her wedding day.”

Padmé snorted while Sola glanced far away while ducking her head. The elder Nabberrie was as far away from being a virgin on her wedding day as Padmé was now, and she knew it. “Mother I appreciate your concern, but I am a very private person by nature. Rest assured I place a great deal of value on romance and love. I desire a family and someone to spend my life with a great deal. Far more than you know. When the time is right you’ll understand. For now I need you to trust me.”

“Alright, dear. I just felt what I said needed to be said.”

Thankfully their food arrived. Padmé needed the break from her mother’s questions and Sola’s mysterious mood. She had said so little thus far and seemed to be watching her very closely. Something tingled in the back of her mind that if Sola suspected something with her and Anakin... by the Force, she did!

And now as the sisters’ eyes locked Padmé knew for certain not only did Sola suspect, she seemed to look right through her to the truth. Before Padmé could consider this further her mother spoke up again.

“Dear, I’m sure you’ll be a bit displeased with your father and me, but we have arranged something we haven’t told you about.”

“And that would be?”

“Guests to arrive shortly who...” As Jobal explained Padmé again wished for that hole to just swallow her up whole.

“Varykino”

One of the Nabberrie family home located in Lake Country Retreat

The long curving garden terrace

Late Afternoon

Naboo

“So am I to take it that you believe Supreme Chancellor Palpatine truly wants to end the war rather than to now win it for pride’s sake if nothing else?”

Walking alongside Ruwee past the balustrade towards the water-speeder’s docking platform, Anakin thoughtfully considered his answer before speaking. “In my humble opinion the Chancellor fully understands that war serves no real purpose for the Republic except to cause unrest, mistrust, and death. He never wanted to go to war to begin with and would do anything to resolve the conflict. But you must understand that the Trade Federation, the Commerce Guild, and those who follow Count Dooku’s lead aren’t seeking to peacefully coexist or to be simply recognized as its own governing body separate from the Republic. They want to rule the Republic and dissolve the Senate altogether.”

Mindful of a perfect first kiss, a beautiful wedding, and the life-changing memory this beautiful terrace held, Anakin managed to find his voice again. “Negotiations are only dangled in the face of the HoloNet and the Chancellor whenever the Republic military push Count Dooku’s forces to the brink of destruction to give the appearance of considering a peaceful end when in fact they escape to regroup and attack anew. It’s a recurring cycle of devious tactics that will only cease when they are utterly defeated.”

Debating the reasons for war were far different than fighting it on the front lines as Anakin had done since day one. A soldier’s perspective came with having lived through the violence and mayhem. The thick, black glove that covered the Jedi’s hand and part of his forearm hadn’t escaped Ruwee’s notice, nor had the burn scar high on his cheek. “If I may switch topics for a moment, I’ve never had a chance to say this to you. I’m sorry for your loss, Anakin.”

Clenching his robotic hand into a fist, Anakin heard the barely audible turbine motors whirl in response. A constant reminder of the second worst failure of his life. Fury suddenly lit the pupils of his eyes. “Rest assured when next I meet Count Dooku in battle he will lose far more than an appendage.”

Ruwee sensed an unwavering confidence marking this man. A Jedi with a beast’s rage. “Of that I have no doubt.”

Pausing with his back to the stone terrace, a wistful expression came over Ruwee’s face. Such dark, dangerous times they now lived in. The peace and tranquility of Naboo was in stark contrast to the war being fought across the galaxy. “Here is my most dreaded concern. With the considerable might of the Republic Clone Army and the Jedi Order working as one I fail to see how Count Dooku and those loyal to him could possibly have waged this war for two and a half years without some behind the scenes agenda.”

“And by that do you mean Palpatine using the war to hold onto his power?”

Mildly surprised at the Jedi’s assertion, Ruwee discovered a newfound respect for the man. “From what I hear he is a close friend of yours.”

“Do not mistake that for blind allegiance,” Anakin declared.

Ruwee gave a slow nod before turning to look out over the beautiful lake and the mountains in the distance. The war had not touched Naboo the way it had ravaged other worlds and civilizations. But for how much longer would that be true? “I worry that Palpatine has become so powerful and so used to that power that whatever will allow him to keep it is acceptable to him. And if that means continuing a war then so be it.”

Ruwee wasn’t a man that spoke in riddles, and for that Anakin was grateful. He held a great dislike for men of that nature. “That’s a bold train of thought.”

Ruwee sighed, “No, it’s a fear.”

Anakin was quiet for a moment as Ruwee’s words sank in, troubling him in a way he had not anticipated. That in itself was worrisome as he hadn’t leapt to the Chancellor’s defense as he had in similar talks with Obi-Wan and Padmé. In truth, Palpatine was as human and flawed as any other being, though under much more considerable pressure. But at the end of the day anyone was capable of anything. “I sincerely want this war to end.”

“Son,” Ruwee noted in a fatherly tenor, resting his hand on Anakin’s shoulder, favoring him with deep affection. “I truly believe that. You carry yourself with honor and dignity. I respect you and not because of the HoloNet’s high praise of your amazing abilities. My daughter speaks of you in such a way that I am almost humbled by her admiration. And as long as people like you are fighting for and looking after the Republic there is hope for us all.”

Truly touched, Anakin bowed as a show of respect. “Thank you, Ruwee. I must say, I hold equal admiration and respect for your daughter. Padmé is a spectacular woman. Her brilliance and beauty are unmatched in all the galaxy.”

The light shining in his blue eyes exposed something deeply hidden within this powerful man. Perhaps that which he held most dear, a longing he could never speak of. Ruwee suspected that had Anakin lived any life other than the extraordinary one he was born into he would seize the day and claim Padmé as his own. His heart’s secret was revealed in the dedicated tenor of his voice when speaking of his devotion.

Though he would not say this out loud, Ruwee would have been overjoyed had Anakin been Padmé’s suitor. “Your friendship, protection, and presence in my daughter’s life offers me a great deal of peace, Anakin. Thank you for looking after her.”

The purest essence of his tortured soul laced his next words. “I would gladly lay down my life before I let any harm befall Padmé.”

Conviction of the highest order was easily recognizable. “I believe you,” Ruwee replied as he considered the Chosen One, this Jedi with such incredible gifts and a good heart to match. He counted himself lucky to have the chance to get to know him better. “I’d like to again thank you for indulging me in this... most curious endeavor.”

“I fully understand the need to ensure one’s self of a man’s true intentions when concerning your daughter,” Anakin noted as they arrived at the water-speeder’s dock. A small silver craft approached rapidly, no doubt carrying Ruwee and Jobal’s surprise.

“Well it’s a strange request I made of you, and one that I appreciate your discretion where Padmé is concerned.” Ruwee watched with Anakin as the speeder docked below. Paddy Accu secured the vessel. “Jobal and I worry not only for Padmé’s safety, but for her well being as a human being. Sharing your life with another person is what makes life worth living. So to that end, while we do not seek to try and force a man on her, we feel if we can at the very least push a few quality men into her path that perhaps nature might take its course.”

If by nature Ruwee meant Anakin’s lightsaber taking its course across their throat, then yes, the Jedi Knight was all for these men attempting to win Padmé’s affections. Nonetheless he held his peace as this had the potential to be mildly amusing. Ruwee was counting on his “unique” appraisal of these men.

They didn’t stand a chance.

“Solomon, welcome to the Lake Country,” Ruwee offered his hand to tall, dark haired gentleman wearing a Royal Naboo Starforce uniform bearing the rank of pilot. “I trust your trip was pleasant?”

Shaking Ruwee's hand with a firm hold, Solomon was a bit taken aback by the appearance of Anakin Skywalker. This was going to be some gathering of Coruscant's elite if the Chosen One himself was present. He stood straighter, proud and strong. "Yes, it was fine. Thank you for inviting me to the Senator's dinner party. I cannot wait to meet her in person. I've heard so many wonderful things about her."

"You'll be meeting her soon enough," Ruwee said. "Now tell me, how is your father doing? We haven't spoken since he was given that contract to build those new space stations on Orion-9."

After a brief introduction and polite hand shake, Anakin fell in step behind the duo, listening closely to the Nabberie family plot concerning Padmé's love life. Apparently Solomon was one of three sons of Ruwee's good friend, Kiles.

Having entered the Royal Naboo Starforce when he was eighteen, the now twenty-four year old pilot seemed well mannered and educated. Solomon owned no quick wit, though could carry on a conversation without boring whomever he was talking too. Possessing an athletic build and what Anakin assumed were handsome features, he could definitely capture a woman's attention.

Anakin felt Solomon's utter fascination with Padmé.

Privately told the Senator was single and interested in meeting someone, no doubt more than a bit of an embellishment at the end, Anakin sensed Solomon's eagerness for time alone with his wife. And while the man harbored no devious intentions he was simply not going to be around long.

Anakin followed close behind as he attempted to push aside his own simmering resentment at this disrespect those doing it were unaware of. Alas, this was the life he and Padmé were forced to live. But that didn't make the man within him, the prideful husband who would suffer no man attempting to steal his wife's heart feel any better. Still, this favor to Ruwee could yield benefits in the future when all was revealed and Padmé would thank him for eliminating her having to suffer through a nauseating dinner where all eyes would be on her and another man.

Two female caretakers arrived at the winding stone steps that lead back to Varykino to take Solomon's bags. Ruwee thanked the pilot again for coming and offered to show him around the estate after he settled in. Another handshake was followed by Ruwee coming over to stand beside Anakin again, watching as Solomon entered the estate.

"Well, my friend," Ruwee began with a cautious smile. "He seems like a nice enough young man. He certainly has a career steeped in courage thus far. So what is your take on Solomon?"

Hands behind his back, Anakin initiated a casual stroll towards the lush garden, seemingly collecting his thoughts. He stopped suddenly, a particularly troubled expression clouding his features. "I'm afraid Solomon isn't the man you think he is."

That was the last thing Ruwee wanted to hear as he had high hopes for this one. "What have you learned?"

"I sensed his intimate desires where women were concerned were... deviant in nature," Anakin explained as if it pained him to say. Ruwee look appalled. "I also noted a fondness towards aggressive, and if I may say so, alternative sexual practices."

Ruwee knew a Jedi's intuitions were extremely reliable, but this was a bit much. "Surely you jest?" he smiled hopefully. Anakin's serious expression did not falter.

"No, I'm afraid Solomon's fantasies concerning Padmé borderline on the perverse. I sense that while he handles his duties with courage, he enjoys a far darker aspect of relations with women. He sees your daughter as the conquest of his life. And then there's his drinking problem."

"I have heard enough." Absolutely floored by this unexpected turn of events, Ruwee once again felt bringing Anakin in on this plot paid dividends that were worth the secrecy he held from his daughter. "Thank you, Anakin. I am surprised to say the least, but I appreciate your candor. Rest assured a crisis will emerge in the next hour or so, and Solomon will be asked to leave. For now please enjoy the rest of your day. I will not have need of your abilities until tomorrow evening."

What was that? Anakin looked up, "What happens then?"

"The other four men invited to spend a few days here arrive. Hopefully we'll have more luck with one of them. Good day, Anakin." Turning, Ruwee made his way back towards the estate.

Unbelievable!!!

Before Anakin could utter a single word to end this farce he was assaulted by the full bodied force of Pooja rushing into his arms. She hugged him tight and for a brief moment he simply allowed himself to enjoy it, returning the affection. "Well hello, little one."

"Hi, Ani." The child clung to him really tight, and then out of the view of the nearby garden caretakers she slipped a small folded note inside his cloak. She whispered in his ear, "I'm on a mission." Grinning wildly, she smooched his cheek and then ran off giggling. No doubt pleased she's a part of the secrets adults are keeping around her.

Casually making his way behind a row of massive columns, Anakin reached for and read the note. That handwriting was unmistakable.

'A LATE LUNCH AWAITS YOU AS DO I. THE SITTING ROOM ON THE FAR NORTH SIDE OF THE ESTATE AT THE END OF THE HALL. P.A.N.S.'

"Pans," Anakin noted to himself with such pride that it filled his chest to overflowing. Padmé Amidala Nabberrie Skywalker or P.A.N.S, her private codename whenever they had to communicate in secret. Her true name in spite of those unknowingly seeking to champion her a new love life.

Shrouded in the shadows of the columns, choked from the daylight as his love for Padmé ever was, the amusement of moments ago faded for Anakin. Yet again he was reminded of all that was denied him. The basic right to be with his beloved in public... to hold her hand and hear her true name spoken... to be free to simply express the immense pride he carried in his soul at being her husband.

All buried beneath a mountain of lies and deceit, now years deep with no hope of an end in sight. They were being crushed beneath the massive weight of his duty as a Jedi Knight and Padmé's as a Senator of the Republic.

Now he was to suffer the indignity of a dinner party filled with men looking to steal Padmé's heart with her parents' consent. And while he was sure it was more than impossible, the experience itself would be one no husband should have to endure.

Suddenly his emotions shifted as a sweltering breeze swirled by, ghosting his Jedi robe. A primal simmering grew in Anakin's belly, churning the flames of his soul, seeking an immediate sustenance. An unquenchable thirst only his angel could satisfy.

Fierce excitement coursed through his veins as sprinted nonstop through the courtyard towards the twenty-foot far wall overlooking the north side of the estate and leapt in one great jump, now poised atop the roof. The sitting room he sought was just below him. Using the Force, he defied gravity itself by forward flipping off the roof and directly into the room's open window.

Upon rising to his feet, Anakin found the sunlit sitting room empty save for his beloved. Surrounded by a wealth of historic Naboo decor, Padmé awaited him by a broad glass table near five open windows. Her gorgeous, elegant white summer dress illuminated her angelic beauty as the thick coils of her lovely brown hair framed her adoring face when she saw him.

"Are you hungry, love?"

Padmé could not have spoken more appropriate words, though for reasons other than she intended. Anakin's hungry stare drank in the alluring vision of her, how her thin dress clung tight to the subtle curves of her trim figure. Her affinity for backless attire drove him mad once more, sinful and regal simultaneously. She was a revelation that stole the very breath from his lungs.

She was undeniably his.

Forever his.

That sole thought, the truth of his existence submerged Anakin's spirit in fire. Here, now, he would not be denied what he wanted.

Silent as her voice suddenly escaped her, Padmé felt a hot wind caress her skin from the window, billowing through her hair. She captured Anakin's smoldering gaze, lost in his aggressive masculinity and the way he never masked his ravenous need for her. She reveled in that knowledge. What was planned as a private afternoon lunch for two somehow evolved into so much more.

She was his prey.

Padmé long ago accepted that they knew each other soul deep, written in blood and pain and the most intense love imaginable. She read his innermost thoughts like a favorite novel before bedtime and could hear him in her head whispering to her in seductive tones, longing to possess and tame her.

As a wave of liquid heat settled between her inner thighs, Padmé had no idea what he'd seen or done or what had led to this, but the woman in her could never deny him. Never! "I'll

ask again. Are you hungry, love?"

Refusing to relinquish the sight of her for even a second, Anakin calmly lifted his hand. The Force awakened as the window he entered in shut, the curtains falling into place, drowning out the sun's rays. He was suddenly bathed in a silhouette of shadows.

Padmé's gaze trailed his measured steps across the room as one by one the windows all shut, their curtains draped accordingly as the Force obeyed its master. The door lock clicked loudly in place as a hauntingly dusky sort of radiance barely filtered in, shunning them from the outside world. Poetic perhaps as their true selves were always hidden.

His stride towards her erased the distance between them, his body now crushing her against the table. The naked need exposed on his face swelled her nipples to erection, pressed taut against the soft fabric of her dress. The dominant invasion of her personal space when his arms closed tight around her waist left her weak in the knees.

Her left hand slowly rose to his broad chest, coming to rest over the heart that beat for her alone. "Have I misjudged your appetite, Master Jedi?"

Master Jedi... Never simply a Knight in her eyes. Never denied even the rank he knew she felt he so richly deserved. With his flesh hand he grasped hers, lifting it until his lips brushed warmth over the smooth skin of her palm. She was forever a Queen in his eyes and deserved such praise. The light scent of her perfume was alive in his nostrils, heady and wanton.

Padmé carefully considered his amorous mood. The hard length of him throbbed against her belly, awakening an aching need to be filled with him. To be taken by him until she abandoned all her inhibitions. "How am I supposed to give you what you want if you don't ask for it?" Of course he gave her a roguish smile, enjoying the game they played so well.

"I purchased some of those Desi sandwiches you love so well," she informed him. "We also have fresh fruit and cold Sorsa Berry juice. For dessert I have..."

His hands rose to the twin shoulder straps of her white dress, gently dragging them down her slender arms, effectively pooling the dress at her feet. Naked before him save a pair of white lace panties, she calmly stepped out of her shoes, all the while loving the fiery hunger in his eyes.

"Three pieces of fudge cake," Padmé finished as if he'd done nothing at all. As if she weren't a visual feast he seemed on the edge of plundering to his heart's content. Sparing a sharp glance over her shoulder at the food prepared on the table, she arched a daring brow. "Do you like what you see?"

Towering powerfully over her, Anakin slowly shrugged off his Jedi robe and then his shirt. He finished undressing down to his pants, loving the shy blush that came over her lovely face when he caught her staring. Reaching for her, his hands spanned the gentle curves of her hips.

Unable to resist a moment longer, he dove in, capturing her voluptuous mouth with such intense greed. Kissing her deeply with an insatiable lust that was borderline out of control. Her hands lifted of their own accord, cupping his face, dragging his mouth hard against hers, possessing him as he possessed her.

Padmé would have heard the dishes, bowls, cups, and a pitcher lifting from the table to some unknown location if her tongue wasn't being sucked in her husband's mouth so

decadently. No one and nothing could tame this wild, dangerous man... except her. That thrilled her to no end, now the focal point of his entire world. She was that with which he could not live without.

She loved him. More than anything that existed in this world. More than anything or anyone, period.

"Tell me," Padmé gasped hot over his cheek, 'What you,' she wasn't able to finish when his mouth suckled her throat, "Want?"

Reaching for her panties, his flesh hand felt the moisture soaked center, evidence of her arousal. Her answer came when he tore her panties down off her hips, and then lifted her off the floor and seated on the edge of the table. His manhood throbbed that very instant.

Anakin gently laid Padmé down and then suddenly their mouths merged again, voraciously attacking each other as their passion burned white hot. When his flesh hand firmly cupped her breast, she whimpered through clenched teeth. Each tweak of her hard nipples caused her back to arch until he curled his tongue around one pebbled peak before drawing hungrily from the tip. "Ani... Oh, that feels so good."

Taking his own dear time, Anakin paid loving homage to her small breasts, his mouth and tongue worshiping her soft skin, his hands caressing her body to a flushed state that left the air ripe with the scent of an aroused woman. Soon his tongue left a wet trail down her body, pressed over the fluttering muscles of her toned belly, teasing her naval before hovering over the sweetest rose... the heated, glistening flesh of her sex.

"Yes, angel," Anakin spoke at last, his voice heavy with desire, eyes hooded darkly. "I am hungry... for you."

When his open mouth descended Padmé's vision went dark.

That first long, lazy brush of his strong tongue down and then back up drew such a cry from Padmé's lips her entire body shuddered in applause. Her back arched high, eyes shut to the erotic sight of her husband's head rocking back and forth between her thighs, feasting on her. The sensual sound of his mouth suckling her was unbelievable, and then his tongue lashing her with firm strokes shot ecstasy throughout her body.

"Ani, yes... Love you, Ani..."

The closed windows amped up the room's temperature as they were both perspiring already. None of that mattered as the taste of his angel made Anakin an addict, forever addicted to her love. His hands descended, filling with the rounded cheeks of her firm backside, pulling her to his starving mouth as she writhed passionately. "I desire only you for all the days of my life," he gasped before drawing her clit into his mouth, suckling hard. "Lose yourself, Padmé Let go. Come for me."

He ate, drank, devoured, his mouth delighting in the flavor of her glistening skin. She groaned, rolled her hips toward him, the sweat of her thighs slicking his face. Her fists clenched by her sides, beating at the table.

Padmé's heart stopped beating for a split second as her body shook uncontrollably when her climax hit.

“Anakin, mercy!” she strained through a series of euphoric body-quaking convulsions that curled her toes, her legs closing tight around her husband’s head. When her back arched high like a bow her world erupted in sweet sensation as his mouth continued drawing her pleasure out until the sensations were too great and she had to push his face away with her hand, now lying on her side shuddering, unable to move.

Standing before her once more, Anakin beheld his wife’s luscious form and died a little death, so enthralled. Lying on the table, Padmé was so small and slender, her fair skin flushed passionately, covered in a fine sheen of perspiration. Her gorgeous curly brown hair splayed out over the table. Her exquisite mouth parted as were her toned thighs. “You’re magnificent.”

Padmé’s voice trembled as she managed a lazy, sexy, satisfied grin. “You make me feel magnificent,” she confessed. “Sometimes I feel like you brought me back from the dead. I wasn’t truly living until you returned to me.”

When Padmé gingerly sat up Anakin swore she had never looked more beautiful. “I live for you.”

Panting as her breath slowly returned to her, she reminded him, “We live for each other.”

“I belong only to you,” Anakin swore with his heart, the Jedi Order be damned. Her lovely smile lit up the room with its brilliance.

“Am I yours?” Padmé asked what she knew he craved to acknowledge at every turn. His reply came in the form of a smoldering kiss filled with such steamy rapture. Her hand descended the hard planes of his chest, grasping his hardness through his pants in her palm, squeezing it with a firm grip. A deep, heady moan fell against her lips until she gently pushed him away, breaking the kiss.

Living a conservative life overflowing with loneliness and disappointment made each and every opportunity to defy such a life golden. With Anakin, Padmé could break free of the shackles of her boxed-in existence. She could tempt fate, be unpredictable and wild in a way no one thought she was capable of.

That Padmé lived within her as well, beside the daughter, the sister, the Senator, and the accomplished, educated married woman. This was the woman that could step out of her supposed shell and indulge her mind, body, and soul however she chose.

“Do you love me?”

Sighing, Anakin buried his face in her hair. “Always.”

“Am I yours?”

“Till the day you die and beyond.”

Pushing herself off the table’s edge, Padmé pressed up against Anakin, and then angled her body around until she felt the hard heat of his erection against her naked backside, throbbing. His arms closed around her middle, locking their sweaty bodies together.

For Padmé, the very real danger of getting caught, of someone walking by and hearing them, discovering their secret, and the animalistic act she desired excited her greatly.

Spreading her legs, she slinked her body forward and bent over the table, grinding back against the hardness she created. "Then take me like I'm yours."

The rustle of clothing being removed sent shivers of anticipation up and down her spine, gripping the very beat of her heart in its wake. The raw position in itself dared her to face his possessiveness, all the while learning about herself and how dearly she loved it. Needed and desired it as much as he did.

And then she felt him, the head of his hard cock pressed at the mound of her sex, seeking entrance. The leather covering his gloved hand steadied her lower back as the air rushed from her lungs when the solid length of him spread her flesh aside so deeply.

"By the Force, you feel so good," Anakin chanted hoarsely as her blissful tightness surrounded him. The high whimpering cry she made when he fully sheathed himself nearly tore his heart asunder, so sweet was the sound. Easing out nearly to the tip, he drove forward hard, rocking the table, driving the very breath from his her lungs.

With his hands gripping her hips Anakin took her relentlessly, squeaking the table's legs over the floor, utterly lost in his need to claim her for all time.

Nails scratching at the table's glass surface, Padmé felt him so deep inside her he would never be able to leave. His aggression amplified her pleasure a thousand fold. The methodical slapping of their flesh left her shuddering in a crazed rhythm of fiery ecstasy. The mental knowledge of engaging in such a primal act excited her even more as her silken walls clasped hot around him, drawing strongly on him with every surging penetration. "More... don't stop. I need you, Ani... more."

Every single thought-shattering word she spoke was accompanied with a powerful thrust of his hips, the hungry abyss of her body pulling so pleurably around him. He caught sight of the way her back glistened with beads of perspiration as he was denied the look of passion on her face, but heard the heady rush of her breath, left him drowning within her. Nothing had ever felt so good.

Padmé moaned loudly, her eyes squeezed shut, the rapid impact of his body coursing pleasure throughout her own. She allowed him to set the rhythm and intensity when she lowered her head down to her forearms, panting and moaning while thrusting back at him desperately. Force, she loved the primal sounds he made, his heavy breathing and the lustful aggression he took out on her.

"You're mine, Padmé," Anakin swore to the Force itself, giving her deep, throaty wails courtesy of the savage onslaught of taking her from behind harder. Her love for him allowing him this indulgence knew no boundaries. The erotic vision of his cock moving in and out of her was intoxicating, as was the erotic sway of her back.

And then she cried out once more, shaking so hard as he slumped over her back, holding her tightly through her a writhing, ear-splitting orgasm. He himself was so close and just a little more would...

"Ani, stop," she gasped heavily.

He did so immediately, fearing in his lust he had hurt her. "Angel?"

"Over there... bring that chair over here."

Mindlessly he obeyed, manipulating the Force to pull the burgundy, armless high-back chair from the back wall to beside the table. He gently withdrew himself from her, standing away.

Padmé sincerely welcomed his silence in trusting her, in needing to please her in all ways. Standing upright, albeit a bit gingerly, she turned to face him. By the moons of Naboo he was glorious, all hard sweaty muscle and thick manhood. That wild, sensual look in his eyes was there all because of her and she loved it. “Sit in the chair, Ani. I need to see your face when you lose control. I need to feel your arms around me.”

Moving to the chair, Anakin did as he was told, his pointed gaze following her every move. With a sensual flair governing her mood, Padmé confidently straddled his lap high, and then took him in her hand before easing down slowly on him until she had all of him trapped inside her, stretching her deliciously. Until her backside rested on his upper thighs, the heat of his breath fanning her neck as her head was thrown back in ecstasy.

“My love,” Anakin proclaimed in a passionate whisper over her throat, kissing her there. His hands found the luxuriance of her curly, thick hair as her hips began to move in slow rhythmic circles. Her strong thighs tightened over his waist as she took him now, the hot depths of her willing his very soul from his body.

Her nails raked over his sweaty back, the fragrance of their lovemaking all around them. Padmé whined so softly as he filled her, his arms now locked tight around her. The hardened peaks of her nipples rubbed over his chest, ghosting new sensations throughout her body as her hips rocked wickedly over his lap. And then his mouth opened warmth over her neck, his tongue lashing long over her throat before suckling the flesh. “You’re mine, Jedi.”

His own words thrown back at him. “Forever,” he chanted, nibbling her ear, gently biting the tip. She shuddered in response, and then moaned without vocal restraint as he found the rhythm of her hips with his own, grinding low and deep while clutching her so tightly. The added friction over her clit reduced her to near sobbing, so sweet was the pleasure.

Sweat trickled down their bodies in rivets of pure desire as the room felt like a heated sauna. Padmé crushed her lips with his, drowning in the taste of his mouth and the protective way he held her so close. The now constant throbbing within her was evidence enough how close he was to losing himself. Slowing her kisses, she allowed her lips a breaths space over his, her brown eyes opening to the sky blue of his own.

“Come inside me,” she quietly breathed over his lips, her back and hips working in tandem as she rode him at a hard gallop. “Give yourself to me... give it all to me. Please, Ani. Come inside me.”

Surely the windows shattered from his roar as she felt him stiffen inside her, and then burst sweetly time and time again, his entire body convulsing in her arms as she held him, as he held her.

Soft, quiet moments later they were still in the same position, exhausted and in dire need of a refresher session. Still, this intimate closeness, this beloved affection had been enjoyed to few and far between during the war. So for now they simply stole the moment, thinking of nothing more than how good it felt to be together.

"I can't believe I did all of that," Padmé half-giggled over his right shoulder, her eyes shut, a blush of sorts fanning her fair complexion. "I mean I'm certainly no prude, and this is far from our first time, but... My goodness, my parents and my sister's family are here," she laughed into his moist skin.

Lifting herself a bit to look at her husband, she found Anakin grinning a lazy-sexy expression, his eyes still shut, his white teeth bared. "I think you're a bad influence on me," she teased before pressing her lips to his forehead. "Well are you going to say anything?"

Hands resting on her thighs, Anakin found the most beautiful woman in the galaxy staring at him, her hair a complete mess, but still gorgeous. "Senator Amidala, you are hereby under arrest for being the Sith Lord the Jedi have been looking for."

Her mother once told her men needed to be smacked upside the head once in a while. She never truly understood the sentiment until now. "Don't make me communicate with Obi-Wan of what his former Padawan's been getting into... while on vacation."

"Please never mention Ben's name while naked again. It makes me feel uncomfortable."

Smiling, she whispered okay before another long, loving kiss.

Suddenly loud voices and commotion could be heard as people ran down the hall past the room. Padmé and Anakin quickly extricated themselves and sought their clothing as fast as possible. Thankfully there was no mirror around as Padmé knew for certain she wasn't the least bit presentable. Anakin seemed amused by the expression she wore that said it all as they got dressed.

"THEED ROYAL PALACE IS UNDER SEIGE! THE QUEEN IS IN DANGER! AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT IS TAKING PLACE!" Paddy Acu's distinct voice could be heard shouting down the hall, no doubt seeking to secure and warn the Nabberie family.

"We have to get to the Palace now," Padmé stated, looking to Anakin.

"I'm going there now. Not you."

Clearly offended by the order, Padmé glared at him in shock. "Excuse me?"

"News of your arrival on Naboo might be well known, but not everyone knows where you would be staying. This attempt could have been because of an assumption that you would be staying at the Palace. You might of been the real target."

"If you are correct then that is even more reason that I show no fear of these people by confronting them in person. In any event my presence could help in some way. My duty is to the people of Naboo, and if its queen is in danger then near her is where I need to be."

Her courage notwithstanding, Anakin would hear nothing of it. "No. I won't risk your safety."

"That wasn't a request," Padmé replied leaving no room for further discussion. Turning from him now fully dressed, she made her way towards the door before a lightheaded wave of something came over her so suddenly she fainted in a flash. Anakin was there to catch her before she hit the floor, scooping her in his arms.

Reaching out with the Force, Anakin scanned the hallway and discovered the family and servants gathering on the other side of the estate. He knew he could deposit Padmé in her room and then tell the family she was safe and sleeping before leaving for the Palace. “I won’t risk your safety under any circumstance, Padmé. And I’m sure you’re going to want to kill me after what I just did and am about to do.”

The End of Chapter 3

Chapter 4: Anakin is in mortal danger as Padmé deals with the crisis, what he did to her, and her mother’s growing suspicions.

Chapter 4

Title: "The Ties That Bind"
Chapter 4?
Written by: Shawn

Summary: With a deadly siege taking place at Theed Palace, Anakin is in mortal danger while Padme deals with the crisis, what he did to her, and her mother's growing suspicions. An unexpected visitor further complicates matters.

Category: Drama/Romance

Rated: M for all that it implies.
Ship: Anakin and Padme Skywalker

Timeline: I've always believed the Clone Wars lasted about three and a half years. This story takes place at the two and a half year mark. So it's been two and a half years since PA were married. None of her family know about the nuptials.

Disclaimer: GL owns everything.

Beta Read by: The Dark Lord of the pen, Master Anne bows respectfully

Authors Notes 1: At the end of the day life is all about family.

Authors Notes 2: I'm no longer sure how many chapters it will take to finish this story, but I doubt more than five. For now I shall leave it as a question mark.

"You can close your eyes to things you don't want to see, but you can't close your heart to things you don't want to feel." unknown

"There's this place in me where your finger prints still rest... your kisses still linger and your whispers softly echo... It's the place where a part of you will forever be a part of me" unknown

"When you remember how hard it is to change yourself, you begin to understand what little chance we have of changing others" unknown

Solleu River

A subterranean tunnel network beneath the capital city of Theed

Just after nightfall Naboo

Qui-Gon's presence was surely with him this night.

Carefully navigating a razor sharp Norsa-corral reef, Anakin swam the cold, dark waters beneath Theed City with the Force as his guide. The small breathing apparatus held between his teeth was already beginning to run low on air, only adding to the dangers of transversing the extremely dangerous subterranean tunnels that seemed endless in size.

Not to mention the massive sea creatures he'd heard so much about from Obi-Wan upon his Master's first visit to Naboo. Only moments ago he barely managed to escape a wild horned beast three times larger than his Jedi star fighter by entering a narrow crevice the beast couldn't follow after him into.

The shadowy underwater depths wrecked havoc with his eyes as he sought the secret emergency escape tunnel Qui-Gon and Obi Wan used to sneak into the city over a decade ago. Many of the tunnels were collapsed for security purposes, but two remained just in case the Queen needed to be whisked away suddenly for her protection. Even if they had been rerouted he'd still have a way into the city and hopefully as close to the Palace as possible.

The sooner he secured Queen Jamilla and ended the siege he'd be able to get back to Padme and pray she wouldn't murder him on sight. Over dramatic for certain, but her immense anger with him... the borderline rage... he could feel it from her even hundreds of miles away.

Brushing aside that fact for the time being, he focused on the task at hand as the small alcove he sought was just over a vast rocky horizon.

Anakin sincerely hoped upon arriving at the cave he'd find the Queen with a contingent of Royal Naboo soldiers guarding her. Then he'd attend to the attack force and be done with the entire situation. His assessment thus far offered no such luck as there were no underwater vessels of any kind anywhere in the vicinity.

Swimming behind a mammoth lavender sea plant, he reached out with the Force in hopes of sensing any of the attack force nearby. Nothing, which only added to his worry. The Queen and her cabinet must still be in Theed Palace while the attack force was able to invade without using the tunnels, a fact that shouldn't be impossible considering the advanced new security protocols implemented by Theed Palace since the Separatist's occupation years ago. Security protocols the Jedi themselves aided Naboo authorities in designing.

All alone except for the vivid sea life thriving around him, Anakin made his way into the small alcove, carefully swimming away from the sharp jagged rocks surrounding him. Upon finally cresting the surface inside the escape routes cave dwelling— he found it empty and dark. Not only was it vacant of light, but it didn't appear to have been used in many years or even up kept in case of emergency.

Pulling himself out of the cold waters, moss and corrosion minus any sort of footprints ended any speculation that the attackers used the tunnel system to invade Theed Palace.

Before diving into Solleu River to reach the city and get close to Theed Palace undetected, Anakin listened to the HoloNet's updates on the siege. Apparently a number of armed gunmen and rebuilt Separatist Battle Droids were attacking the palace for some unknown reason. Video footage of the fighting showed the battle was now taking place within Theed Palace itself as residents who lived nearby ran for their lives.

While wishing that he were wrong, Anakin felt there was too much of a coincidence that the attack occurred the day after Padme arrived. Her schedule for security purposes was never divulged to the public, but most Senators stayed at Theed Palace upon visiting Naboo. While it was easy to assume Senator Amidala would visit her family the perception was that she would stay at the Palace.

In the realm of the galaxy Senator Amidala was far more important and a far greater political figure than even the Queen herself. From what was known about the criminal element of Naboo's underworld space pirates, smugglers or those opposing the Queen and her government wouldn't be capable of standing up to Theed Palace's new security force. Off-world attackers... that was another story. All in all Anakin felt this attack concerned his wife in some way. And as headstrong and courageous as she is he simply could not put her in harms way.

She still didn't seem to grasp, even after all this time that if she died she would take him with her. And whatever was left would be too horrible... too broken and lost to imagine.

That theory, as well as the very real and powerful ripple in the Force Anakin felt the moment news broke of the attack left him facing his gravest fear. Any threat to Padme had to be destroyed, and though she might hate him now she was safe with her family while he handled those who might wish harm on her.

Nothing... not even the Force itself would protect them from him.

Running over the gravel surface of the seemingly endless winding caverns, Anakin leapt across a misty bottomless gorge, landing without missing a beat at his top speed. He instinctively navigated the harsh terrain towards a clearing up ahead that led just below Guido's Tower, one of the oldest buildings in Theed and very close to the Palace.

Another great leap saw him land on a rocky ledge overlooking a massive Zera-parasteel vault door. Only three people on all of Naboo at any time could open it and unfortunately he wasn't one of them. But those who built this monstrosity of a security door never counted on the Chosen One seeking those who may want to hurt his angel. And so they never counted on a Force user, with nearly no equal in all the galaxy, manipulating that mystical energy to open the door vault from the outside.

Slowly the cylinder vault door rolled sideways, straining in that it hadn't moved in years, granting him entrance to a dimly lit hallway. Some light was better than no light at all, although the moist humidity was agonizing. Not to mention his clothes were soaking wet. Up ahead, massive stone stairs led to a meager passageway that connected the basement storage area of Guido's Tower with the sole escape route from below Theed Palace. Again, he found no activity whatsoever, nor did he sense the presence of anyone.

But as he crept closer to the secret entrance to Theed Palace's lower floor he felt death, danger, and violence all around him. Upon reaching what seemed to be a wide granite wall, he used the Force to sense for where the escape door indent was and where to press his hand. As soon as the wall fell inward shifted sideways he heard the sounds of laser fire and shouting from above.

The urge to rush into battle had finally been tamed, albeit to some degree by Obi-Wan. Patience would be his ally here as Anakin crept up two long flights of stairs amidst the sounds

of a large scale battle taking place in the ceremonial halls. He hugged the wall toward a corner where two armed men in black clothing barring an insignia he didn't recognize secured the area, standing guard.

Using the Force, Anakin shoved one of the men forward so hard his entire body impacted into the wall with a sickening thud, knocking him unconscious immediately. The second man quickly raised his blaster, firing three shots in rapid succession. The whirl of Anakin's lightsaber deflected all three shots with ease. He advanced faster than the man could shoot, grabbing him by the throat and dragging him quietly away behind a massive stone pillar.

"Who is the target of this assault!" Anakin questioned face-to-face with the soldier. The bald man was unshaven, barring a face marred with scars. He shook his head in fear, having not expected to meet the Chosen One in battle this day. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Your choice."

"We... we're to assassinate both the Queen and Senator Amidala," he began his tale in a voice thick with fear as the hard hand clasped tight around his throat began to squeeze ever tighter.

Anakin seized upon the soldier's fear of him. He used it to his advantage. "Who is your leader? Who arranged this attack? And how did you get past the Palace's security?"

From over the Jedi's shoulder the soldier saw one of his men slowly approach, his weapon trained high on Anakin's head. The rising smirk he wore was short lived as the Jedi shifted his body slightly while raising his gloved palm towards the bolts of laser fire directed at him. They bounced aside as if they were nothing. The Jedi inverted his wrist and the blaster flew from the other soldier's hand into his.

Anakin eyes bored into him. "We would be honored if you would join us."

A moment later both soldiers were braced against the wall with a lightsaber inches from their throats.

"Start talking," Anakin ordered them while reaching out with the Force to sense any more newcomers. He found none as the battle above was still raging on.

The burly older soldier spoke first, dread easily recognizable in the expression he wore. "Someone recruited the Draconian Horsemen," he pointed to the grey insignia on his dark armored vest. "For a special job with a huge payoff. The person who hired us communicated with us through holo-projector disks left for us on the moons of Borgora-5. We never knew who it was and didn't care. The person who hired us provided us with schematics of a section of the far west wall of Theed Palace currently under reconstruction. The security protocols for that section weren't in place yet. We were told if we attacked there we would catch the palace security teams off guard and be able to hold an entire floor of the Palace before they would be in place to stop us. We were provided the best equipment and blasters money could buy and a couple of reconditioned battle droids. We were also paid half a million credits up front with the promise of a million and a half more once the Queen and Senator Amidala were dead."

Fiery anger tore through Anakin as he had hoped assassination attempts against his wife were over. But obviously they must never let their guard down. He ached to be home more to protect her himself, and now he hated the war even more than he had before. His failure to

end Count Dooku's life the first time he faced him had now manifested itself again as his greatest failure. "Have your forces reached the Queen?"

"Not yet," the younger of the two men replied, shaking mightily. "The Queen's royal guards are putting up a fight on the top floors of the palace. They have barricaded themselves inside the throne room. Our forces are setting charges now to detonate the massive doors and..."

Both were silenced instantly when Anakin caused them to faint. He had no time to waste; he raced up the towering steps past the dead bodies of Palace servants, guards and Draconian Horseman to a wide-set window. He then climbed outside it and balanced on a narrow ledge, peering upward. It was just as he had hoped, the Royal Library was directly above him. He had no time to waste as an explosion could take place at any time, and the Queen would be dead. Leaping some fifteen feet into the air, he grasped onto the window's bottom ledge, pulling himself up, and upon looking inside crashed his body through the glass, shattering it everywhere while surprising the five soldiers inside.

What took place next could only be described as a massacre. The five soldiers were simply no match for the Chosen One as he beheaded one of them before getting off a single shot. Deflecting the laser blasts of two soldiers killed another. He forward somersaulted over their heads, slashing through their midsections upon landing. The lone soldier left attempted to run, but Anakin used the Force to shut the doors.

"Do not lie to me as your life hangs in the balance," Anakin warned, his lightsaber aimed at the trembling soldier. "Who is detonating the explosive?"

"There... there seems to be some disagreement amongst our two commanders as to if we should kill the Queen or take her hostage. I... I don't know what they will do. And our escape shuttle hasn't arrived yet either. Something's amiss."

The soldier's body dropped at Anakin's feet, passed out via the Force. The sound of metal grating over the luxurious Acronian flooring outside the library meant battle droids were close. And they would be far harder to defeat than the soldiers thus far.

Taking a few steps back, Anakin Force-blasted both doors off its hinges, sending them flying across the expansive hallway. It drew the quick attention of three battle droids who all aimed their weapons at the noise.

Rushing in, Anakin rammed his lightsaber into the fuel cell of one battle droid, but was hammered when it back-handed him into a stone pillar. He looked up as the damaged battle droids fuel cell ignited, exploding the battle droid and the one closest to it apart. The remaining droid bent into its rolling form, accelerating towards him at a breakneck speed.

Although his lower back was now killing him, Anakin leapt over the droid while slashing it in mid-air. When he landed the droid spun out of control, smashing into a royal tapestry on the wall, now setting it on fire. Thankfully the sprinklers were set off.

Sounds of running footsteps could be heard coming from two separate directions. Anakin ducked behind the smoking remains of the first two battle droids as a small group of soldiers entered the hall. The scent of fear and death hung in the air around him. Igniting his lightsaber once more, he tossed it high and fast at a construction scaffold above the men. The blade cut

through two support beams, causing the scaffold to roll onto its side and then fall, killing all but three of the soldiers.

With their weapons trained high, the survivors scanned the entire area for who had attacked them, only to find simultaneously at the end of the hall stood the Hero Without Fear. Anakin Skywalker himself. All around him were dead bodies of their fellow soldiers and battle droid parts. They instantly knew even minus his lightsaber they had no chance at all.

“We surrender!” was chanted in unison.

Calling his lightsaber back to his hand, Anakin walked past them. “Leave your weapons and run like your life depends on it. Trust me, it does.”

Stealth had no place here as the battle had drawn the attention of the main attack force in the upper floors. The sounds of laser fire had slowed considerably, leaving Anakin to believe that the security forces outside the throne room had been killed. Anakin rounded a sharp corner, then dove to the floor as a hail of laser fire flew above his head. Not for the first time he wished Ben were here. He’d of have made a joke or something. Alas, this was no joking matter.

Rolling across the floor as blasts rattled windows, showering him with small shards of glass, Anakin saw nine armed soldiers advancing on him fast. He Force-shoved two off their feet, then Force-pulled a rug from beneath the rest of their feet, effectively knocking them to the ground.

They weren’t the leaders, and so they were expendable. Lost in the chaos and blood rage of battle, Anakin became death itself, dismembering them two at a time, moving so fast and with such power that not one was even able to fire off a second shot. When it was done bloody limbs littered the floor as the most dangerous Jedi in the galaxy sought those who wanted his wife dead.

Swarms of laser fire were deflected, but even Anakin could not stop them all, He howled in pain as two bit hot into his right shoulder, slamming him into the ground. Red pooled moist beneath his shirt, flowing freely. Rolling over, he regained his footing quickly, pushing aside the intense pain as he launched himself skyward, landing atop another scaffold and then behind two battle droids and five more soldiers.

Close combat worked to his advantage as he quickly dispatched all five soldiers and was even aided when an errant laser blast by one of the battle droids destroyed the other. Despite the searing pain in his shoulder and bicep, he let the Force guide his movements, slashing off both the droid’s blasters and then slamming the blade into its chest.

He ran now, lost in that darker edge of the Force he rarely called upon, killing anything brandishing a weapon as the murdered bodies of Palace security guards and staff were spread about all over the hall. This attack was nothing less than a tragedy as he lost count of the dead after thirty.

Coming upon the throne room, he found several more heavily armed soldiers, two of which wore clothing with different insignia’s than the rest. Perhaps they were the leaders. “You have two options here!” he shouted out to them. “You can die fighting me, or hope you don’t die if I don’t like what you have to tell me about who is truly behind this attack.”

Without the escape shuttle they were promised would be here already, Commander Doth grazed his hand over his grey beard, fearing all was lost and that they were had from the start. "It is over, Jedi. I do not wish to die a pawn. I will tell you all that I know."

Moments later the throne room doors were opened as the Queen's royal guards poured out and secured the remaining soldiers.

"Knight Skywalker, it is an honor to see you again," Queen Jamilla offered quickly as she shook his hand. Her eyes scanned past him at the carnage of today's events. Nonetheless she remained strong. "Thank you for saving us. I was not aware you were on Naboo, but thank goodness you were. Are you in need of any assistance?" She saw the way he favored the right side of his body. "A medic perhaps?"

"Yes, milady. A medic would be helpful." Wincing, the pain was considerable to say the least, but he wasn't going to die from it. "I would appreciate a full report from your authorities when they are done questioning the men. I'm staying at Varykino with Senator Amidala and her family. One of the guards already confessed that both you and the Senator were the targets."

"Was this an assassination attempt or were they trying to kidnap us?" the Queen asked.

"At the beginning I believe this was a straight assassination plot. But it appears there was some disagreement among the attackers' leaders over wanting to capture you instead. The time bought by their bickering probably saved your life."

The Queen nodded, aware of the ever growing danger that even a paradise like Naboo could ignore no longer. "That and you, Knight Skywalker. I am sincerely in your debt."

Bowing respectfully, Anakin turned away. "Excuse me, your highness. I would like to interrogate the leaders myself before handing them over to your people. I believe I might be able to... ensure they tell us everything they know."

Queen Jamilla was more than a little pleased she wasn't in their shoes. "As you wish. And if time permits I would appreciate if you gave my security team a few pointers and ideas on how to better secure the Palace from future attack. I never, ever want to see this happen again."

"As you wish, milady. I shall see to it before I depart Naboo."

"Thank you again, Knight Skywalker."

Walking away, Anakin felt disheartened and angry as even outside the war he found only death and heartbreak stalking him. Not to mention he was bleeding and hurt and even his beloved Angel... for now he would perform his duty.

Soon enough Padme would be his judge, jury, and executioner.

"Varykino"

One of the Nabberie family home located in Lake Country Retreat

The main family sitting room, 3rd floor

After nightfall Naboo

“Ladies and gentleman, the great siege on Theed Palace is over thanks to the heroics of the Chosen One, Anakin Skywalker.”

Jubilant applause and hugging illuminated the Naberrie family and Varykino’s small staff who were huddled together in the family room watching the live HoloNet reports on today’s horrible attack. What began as a day like any other quickly evolved into panic and chaos by afternoon when news spread of the violent attack at the palace. Only moments ago did the Queen herself make a brief, but powerfully poignant public statement on her unwavering determination to bring those responsible to justice while ensuring nothing like this ever happen again.

While overjoyed that the siege was at an end, Padme stood alone in the back of the room behind the others, her arms crossed her chest, her face a mask of outraged emotion. She hadn’t uttered a single word to anyone since the family gathered to watch the crisis unfold, choosing to keep her thoughts to herself.

Unbeknown to Padme, Jobal’s careful appraisal found her reaction to today’s events far more interesting than the HoloNet’s broadcast.

“Details are sketchy at best thus far, but here’s what we know,” said the graying elder statesman of reporters from the Naboo branch of the HoloNet. Standing in front of Theed Palace, he motioned towards the far west corner where the new renovations were being worked on. “This afternoon a heavily armed force of over fifty men, and an undetermined number of battle droids, were able to enter Theed Palace undetected via the construction site and began the siege that would leave by early reports some thirty-three Royal Naboo Guards and Palace staff members dead.”

While slowly shaking his head in disgust, Ruwee’s heart went out to the family and friends of those slain. “By the Force, such a horrible occurrence. This day will live in infamy.”

The reporter continued as the video footage showed the massive crowds gathering around the Palace to pay their respects. “Advanced security protocols should have prevented any firing of a laser blaster within Theed Palace’s walls that wasn’t owned by a Palace guard or officer. Alas, that was not the case today as the soldiers were well inside the Palace before their attack began and were able to catch the security forces off guard. At this time it is believed that the objective of the attack was to assassinate Queen Jamilla.”

Darred hugged his wife closer, sighing. Thankfully his children were asleep. They didn’t need to see this until he and Sola could explain it to them in a way they might understand. That alone would be an incredible undertaking as he himself didn’t understand. “Just look at all the bodies they are bringing out.” Sola rested her head on his shoulder, shutting her eyes briefly to the tragedy.

Feeling helpless was the worst thing in all the galaxy to Padme, but that was exactly how she felt at the moment. Helpless... and betrayed. Utterly betrayed. Pushing aside her immense frustration, her heart went out to those who lost their lives and those left behind. Family members and friends of the deceased are now being contacted with the worst news anyone could ever hope to receive. If there were any fear she understood acutely, if was one of loving

someone performing a dangerous duty that required them to carry a weapon. One never knew when the dreaded news would come.

And what of the innocent men and women of the palace staff?

They certainly never expected to die this day.

Such a tragedy struck at the heart of Naboo in attacking the Queen in Theed. It was probably the worst attack since the Separatists occupation over a decade ago when she served that role. Nonetheless, contrary to the paradise people normally associated when thinking of Naboo its people were strong, resilient, and united.

Although Padme knew the people would survive this trial as they had all others her fist clenched unconsciously, anger growling hot within her belly. Perhaps Anakin was right after all in worrying that this attack may concern her in some way, although his actions spoke of such a lack of respect for her she felt sick with anxiety. She hurt for the dead. She hurt for the people of Naboo who now feared their best couldn't even protect the Queen. She hated those who perpetrated this cowardly attack, wondering if they had any idea how many lives they had ruined if they cared at all.

She was dying inside to learn if Anakin were alright.

Then she wanted to tear him apart herself.

"For reasons unknown at this time, Anakin Skywalker was on Naboo. Thankfully he heard of the siege at the palace and immediately set out for Theed City. Reports are that he successfully fought his way from the lower levels of the Palace to the throne room itself, removing any threat in his path with deadly efficiency. Solidifying his legend as 'The Hero Without Fear', his skills so over matched the attackers that their leaders gave up and are now in custody being interrogated by Anakin himself and Naboo authorities."

As wonderful as the news was that the siege had ended, Jobal did not at all like how Padme was taking this. She endured the same worry and fear as the family and staff, but in her daughter she sensed so much more was on her mind. Or perhaps so much more was alive within in her heart. A mother knows her child best, always, and she couldn't shake the feeling that Padme's dealing with more than the ramifications of the siege and worrying about Anakin's safety. She was sure the latter meant a great deal to her, but there was more taking place.

Padme, for the first time in so long Jobal had to consider if ever, appeared bitter.

"Anakin Skywalker suffered multiple injuries during the attack. We are not aware of the exact severity or type at this time, but early reports are they appear to be non-life threatening. He is being attended to by a medic and then will begin his interrogations shortly."

Sparing a sidelong glance, Jobal contemplated Padme's tense demeanor as she appeared to whisper a silent prayer to herself. Relief flooded her lovely face for an instant until the bitterness returned. Such an emotion she wasn't used to seeing in her youngest child. No, a woman now. Perhaps more so than she had ever given her credit for.

Walking over to Padme, Jobal looped an affectionate arm around her daughter's, and found a small smile awaiting her. It was a start. "I told you he would be alright."

Her mother didn't know how badly she wished she could hear that every night of her life, and not just when it was believed she worried over this isolated incident. Again, her practiced mask of being a good friend fell into play. She was becoming quite the actress. Or was the better term, liar? "Anakin is amazingly talented, efficient, and brave," she began.

Jobal wished to parlay that into adding 'and quite handsome' to gauge her daughter's initial reaction, but thought best not to pry too fast. Her cautious assumptions were evidenced by the way she spoke of Anakin today while they were out earlier with Sola, and how easy Padme's laughter came. How dear her depth of caring extended toward the Jedi Knight.

Did she know how truly happy she sounded, or how foreign such a sound was to her own mother where she was concerned? Jobal captured her daughter's gaze. "Dear, we are all heart-sick over today's tragedy, but what troubles you so?" Softly caressing Padme's cheek, she added in a private tone, "I held you in my belly away from all prying eyes and I would hold anything you told me with the same conviction."

And there it was. An opening to spill her heart out to her mother and end this charade she now struggled to rationalize in her own mind. But Anakin's actions today tore at her in such a way that she felt mute to anything but her anger towards him. "Mom, I assure you I am fine. It's been... it's been a long day and I am worried about the people's reaction to this attack, the loved ones of those lost, and Anakin."

"But there's more."

Padme recognized Jobal's statement rather than it being a question. "Mother..."

"I am no fool, Padme," she warned to a degree. "I worry about you and Anakin." Momentarily her daughter's eyes widened and that small crack in her vaunted armor revealed such a ground swell of emotion it shook Jobal to the core. Mercy, her daughter loved this man... what they shared must be painfully private and unresolved as they weren't permitted to allow it air to breathe.

So much instantly made sense to Jobal. Her daughter's utter disinterest in dating... how she spoke of love when no one ever saw her experience it... how closely Anakin moved in and around her personal space, shadowing her as she did him.

Padme's quiet only emphasized how unprepared she was to speak of what troubled her so. But in time she would, and when she was ready her mother would be waiting. Until then despite her daughter being so successful, intelligent, and grown Jobal pressed a kiss to her temple no different than she had when Padme were a child. "I am here, my love. For you, always."

Saying no more her mother left her behind away, joining her father's side. Padme longed to call out to her, but held her peace. Not trusting herself at the moment she took her leave of the family room, only to hear footsteps following close behind. She never broke stride. "Mother, please."

"Are we so distant these days that you cannot even tell when your sister is following you?"

Despite Sola's annoyed assertion, Padme marched inside her bedroom while listening to the footsteps approach. Dammit, she didn't need this right now. She needed to be alone. "Sola, please. Not now."

“No!” Shutting the door behind her, Sola held her ground, feeling as though this talk was a long time coming. What had at first been a source of great amusement and interest to her now pained her deeply. The sisterhood they shared felt fractured somehow. She sought to remedy that. “Do you remember my second standard year at university? Specifically just before the Harvest Moon?”

Weary and broken hearted, Padme sat at the edge of her bed, and then felt it dip as her sister sat beside her. She was taken back to such a young age when she barely understood why bad things happened, only that she needed to try and stop them. “I could never forget that day, Sola. And I never told anyone what happened.”

“And I knew that you wouldn’t,” Sola declared. “I was so ashamed to have given myself to a man whom I thought truly loved me, only to discover his cowardice and lack of character when I was suddenly with child. Then I suffered through the miscarriage alone because I was too ashamed of what I had done. I told no one but you because you are my dearest friend and sister. I knew with you I would never be judged or made to feel like I wasn’t a good person for being less than perfect. And even though you were young it meant the world to have your support.”

It wasn’t hard to see where Sola was going with this. Padme swallowed her anger as she reminded herself of what they shared. “I will be honored for the rest of my life over the faith and trust you placed in me.”

“And yet you refuse to offer me, of all people, the same.” With her hands in her lap, Sola peered away. “You will never know how badly that hurts me.”

“Sola,” Padme called out and then found her voice vacant of sound. How do you explain the unexplainable? Her life with Anakin was as insane as it was the most incredible, satisfying, fulfilling part of her entire life ever. Burying her face in her hands, her voice strained sadly. “You don’t understand.”

“Help me to understand,” Sola pleaded with her sister, and when Padme began to cry she gathered her in her arms and simply held her, asking no more questions. She offered unconditional love, the hallmark of sisterhood, and her unwavering support to whatever was causing her sister such grief.

The courage..., no, the sheer need to unburden her weary soul erupted at long last. Lifting her gaze, the tears fell in moist trails down her cheeks. The soft touch of Sola’s hand gently wiped them away no different than she did when she were a child. “Just before the Clone Wars began Anakin and I fell in love.”

She was opening up at last. Sola praised the Force. “That long? It wasn’t just a simple attraction or something recent?”

Shaking her head, Padme exhaled a deeply held breath. It felt like she had been holding it for years. “When he was assigned as my protector we bonded in a way I never have with a man before. We’re so different and yet what we share is the most special thing either of us has ever felt before. And I fought it,” she acknowledged, nodding to her sister with tears in her eyes. “I fought loving him so hard; you just don’t know. But the more I fought it the harder I fell. And then his mother died and some part of me became a part of him. Then came the

battle of Geonosis when we thought we were going to die. Right before we were to be executed I finally admitted that I loved him.”

Clearly shaken that her sister has held this inside for so long, Sola held her hand and smiled that she had found someone to love. “He clearly loves you as well. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. It is as if you are all the stars in the sky at once to him.”

Closing her eyes she could feel the warmth of his love, even as the cold she felt fought to shut it out. “I know that he loves me, but he’s done something I may not be able to forgive.”

“What has he done?”

Sighing, Padme gently wiped her face with the back of her hand, the moisture cascading down her palm. “There’s more for you to know before we get into that,” she said, squeezing her sister’s hand. “After Geonosis as you know Anakin lost half his arm dueling Count Dooku. War was declared two days later. We felt like we were caught in a whirlwind of events we had no control over that seemingly controlled our lives. I had fought so hard against the creation of a clone army while he served the Jedi Order despite its mandate that he refrain from romantic attachments.”

Padme continued, “The war was going to see millions of new clones created with the Jedi leading them into battle. We averted no creation of the army, nor the war, and were about to be separated for who knows how long with no guarantee he was even going to come back alive. And then there was the ever present danger that surrounds me due to my public stature and anti-Palpatine political views.”

Sola listened, resting her head on her sister’s shoulder.

“Nothing felt within our grasp. Not our lives or our careers. But we could do one thing for us, selfishly taken because we felt we deserved it. We needed something to hold onto. To bind us so that we never forgot no matter how crazy things were around us the truth of our lives was that we loved each other endlessly.”

“What did you do, Padme?”

Turning her face so that it rested against her sister’s, Padme revealed her greatest secret. “When he escorted me back to Naboo we were married secretly.” Sola’s sharp gasp was almost funny as it clearly exposed how truly shocked she was. For a time she didn’t even blink. ‘My true name is Padme Amidala Naberrie Skywalker,’ she smiled behind her tears. “No one knows this except Dormi and Captain Typho. I just don’t think the droids count, but they do as well.”

“Padme, that was almost three years ago,” Sola heard herself say as if it were a dream. “Why did you keep this a secret from the family for so long?”

“Because of the scandal the news would bring if it ever got out,” Padme replied. “Anakin is forbidden by the Jedi Code to enter into romantic relationships. Publicly my marriage would bring shame and ridicule to Naboo’s representative in the Senate, and our family as well. I could be removed from my post, and Anakin would be expelled from the Order.”

“But your family would have kept your secret. No one would ever have said a word.”

Truthfully, Padme knew that. But deep down she still worried. A constant ache that was years old now. “The less people who knew, the better. We had hoped that the war wouldn’t last long, and then we would sit down and discuss if we wanted to leave everything behind. But Sola, Anakin is the Chosen One. He has a destiny to fulfill of great importance, and I have a job to do. One that becomes tougher each day corruption erodes the Republic, and trust me, it is happening as we speak. I feel in some way I was a part of the problem by not fighting hard enough. I intend to be part of the solution.”

“At the expense of your own happiness.”

“For now, yes.”

“But the war...” Again, Sola watched as Padme’s emotional defenses fell and she began to sob in her arms. Her husband was off fighting a savage war all across the galaxy. What horrible thoughts she must go to bed with every night.

“I see him so rarely, Sola. It pains him to see me cry when he leaves and try as I might not too, my feelings fail me. We are hopelessly lonely for each other and aren’t even allowed the ability to stay in communication contact on a regular basis. The time we are able to steal together is brief and hidden, as if our love is some foul thing to be kept in the shadows. It hurts so badly sometimes I can barely breathe.”

The urge to insist her sister walk away clashed with her knowledge that her sister never left a goal unfinished. She wanted to be there when this war needed as she felt it began on her watch. She held the fate of the galaxy on her shoulders, no matter if it belonged there or not. No, she would not walk away. She would fight until the bitter end because that is who she was.

Someone had to fight for those who couldn’t fight for themselves. Padme championed that cause ever since she was a child.

“Thank you for confiding in me,” Sola whispered to her sister, now crying softly herself. “I love you, and I love Anakin. I will do whatever you wish. If you want me to keep this secret I will die with it in my heart. Not even the afterlife will know.”

Something of a small laugh bubbled out of Padme. A sensation she sorely needed. “Are you waxing poetic in your old age?”

“Dear sister, I am barely eleven standard years your senior. I’m in my prime to say the least. Just ask Dared.” Mightily appalled at her amorous claim, Padme laughed again as the mood lightened. A sisterhood was reclaimed.

“Never say those words to me again, alright?”

“Fine.”

Padme thanked her with a strong hug. “There’s more to tell, but that’s the bulk of my secrets.”

“Then what has Anakin done recently to anger you so?”

“It’s what he did today.”

“Varykino”

One of the Nabberie family's home located in Lake Country Retreat Newly built private starship landing platform

Late night Naboo

Lit by a gorgeous night sky, the long flight from Naboo's capital city of Theed to the Nabberie villa had given Anakin time to not only appreciate the grand visual splendor that was his wife's beautiful home world but to consider his options in dealing with her as well. Never mind the painful throbbing in his shoulder and lower back, he felt infinitely worse over the hurt feelings he sensed his angel enduring.

Hurt feelings he had caused her and now would have to answer to.

Navigating for the thrill of it through a winding dark mountainous gorge, Anakin thought over what he learned in the last two hours he interrogated the leaders of today's assault. Padme and the Queen were the primary targets, so his initial hunch was right, unfortunately. From his recollection the Draconian Horseman were little more than capable galactic thugs, they were known for their fearlessness in taking on any assignment. The real culprit behind today's attacks was still out there, lurking with cold hate in what passed for a heart.

Padme's list of enemies included some of the most powerful, feared beings in the galaxy. From Count Dooku and General Grievous to Nute Gunray and Rune Haako those who would do her harm for no reason other than she fought for justice and peace wanted her dead. But death would visit them someday. All of them.

Anakin vowed to arrange the meeting.

The basics of the plot were simplistic and not well planned after the initial siege began. How they got into the Palace was brilliant, but the escape plan never materialized as the promised starship both leaders spoke of never arrived. In fact, Naboo's Defense Radar Towers didn't pick up any ships in the area or even the faint radioactive signatures of a cloaking device.

The attack force was either a pack of bumbling fools or were pawns left behind to be slaughtered once they accomplished their goal. Either way the true mastermind behind the day's assassination attempts was still out there. A cowardly faceless, foe who tried once and would try again.

Anakin couldn't do anything about that now. For the time being Padme would be safe under his protection, and he would review her current security protocols back on Coruscant to see if any revisions would help. She was safe... for now.

But mercy of the Force, she was so angry with him. And so very disappointed.

The private estate's landing platform came into view as he accelerated his star fighter's engines, whipping the small ship into position before gently descending with its landing gear in place. R2's constant chirping was missed as he had rushed to leave for Theed so fast he left the droid behind. Probably not the smartest move he'd made today. That droid may have saved his life more times than Obi-Wan.

He doubted the little droid was a match for his wife. In fact, no one was.

Standing on a small observation deck ahead were his family, although only one of them knew it. Yet again a proper reunion was denied him. That was becoming the story of his life. Being denied what he wanted. Even what he had earned.

The resentment was building.

Ruwee, Jobal, Padme, and Sola looked on as the canopy of his ship lifted. While heavily favoring his right shoulder, Anakin carefully climbed out of the cockpit, his eyes focused solely on Padme's standing behind her relatives. Her feelings of immense relief and love for him betrayed her momentarily, though she hid it well. She was far better than him at that.

"Anakin, son, we saw what happened on the HoloNet. Once more your bravery humbles us," Ruwee said while offering him a hand to walk that was politely declined. He understood a man's pride. "We are so proud of you and thankful that you are alright. Please let me know if you are in need of anything?"

Facing Ruwee, Anakin shook his head, ever grateful for his respect and kindness. "Two blaster shots hit my right shoulder, and my lower back is bruised from a bad fall, but I'll be fine. My tolerance for pain is, shall we say, higher than most. Thank you for your concern. I think I need sleep more than anything else."

"That you shall have, uninterrupted," Ruwee promised.

Jobal's concerned expression earned her a small smile as Anakin didn't want her to worry. She half-hugged his left side, and then brushed a paternal kiss over his cheek, caressing it softly. She reminded him so much of his mother, and that only worsened his pain despite her sincere compassion. "I assure you I have endured worse than this. I'll recover. I always do."

Having fought in the war for over two years now, Jobal was sure of that fact, sad as it was. Such a strong, powerful warrior and yet she wanted to care for him as she would have a son had the Force blessed her with one. Stepping aside, she squeezed his hand, a gentle smile adorning her face. "I'm going to hold you to that."

Sola greeted him next, whispering in his ear, "Thank you... for so many things."

Not sure how to respond, he gave a curt bow. When Sola stepped aside he at last stood before Padme, her lovely brown eyes filled with such stark emotion he felt a shiver traverse his spine. But in an instant all his worries dissolved when she walked into his arms, clutching him beneath his robe, her face buried in his tunic. At once his nagging pain faded away into nothingness. With his left arm he embraced her tightly, tucking her head protectively beneath his chin.

Those who wanted to hurt her... they were going to die on their knees, begging, and be shown no mercy at all.

Fighting to regain her composure as they were not alone, Padme carefully stepped away, already hating the loss of his body pressed to hers. No matter what he'd done she would be forever shattered if he had died. Each and every time he cheated death to return to her was a blessing. Thankfully, her family at least understood the close friendship they shared. Sola knew better, and she feared her mother did as well. That would have to be dealt with at another time. "Do you need to see a medic?"

With his back to her family, Anakin whispered a quiet “I love you,” to which her lip trembled as she gave a small nod in reply. ‘No,’ he assured her out loud, aware of the eyes upon them. “I’m all patched up and I have pain meds to help me sleep tonight. I may forgo them to meditate, but at least I have them. I’m alright.”

Padme sighed, unable to even take his hand for fear of the questions such a gesture might raise. Reserved in all facets of her life, she desperately longed for all that she couldn’t have.

As the party made their way toward the retreat’s entrance, Ruwee caught up to Anakin. “What can you tell us of the siege?”

“I had feared that Padme was the target, and I was right. She and the Queen were to be assassinated by a group of off-world mercenaries known as the Draconian Horseman.” Jobal blanched at the mention of another assassination attempt, as did Sola. Ruwee scowled angrily. Padme remained stoic, somehow used to the danger. She hated what it did to her family far more than the threat itself. “Whoever hired them is unknown, but the investigation continues. Republic investigative officials will arrive tomorrow and work in conjunction with the Naboo Royal Security. The culprit will be found and brought to justice. That I promise. For now though I will ensure no harm befalls Padme.”

“And for that we are eternally grateful,” Sola added gratefully.

Entering the retreat, Jobal yawned softly, taking her husband’s hand. She knew what Anakin needed more than anything else and prying eyes would not grant him that. After giving Sola a non-to-subtle nudge, she said, “Anakin, if you need anything just let us know. For now you might do well to try and get some sleep. It’s been a busy day to say the least. Goodnight.”

With those parting words Jobal and Ruwee departed. Sola waved her goodnight as well, leaving Anakin and Padme alone.

Silence reigned upon slowly climbing the long staircase. At one point Padme had to take hold of his left arm to steady him, though she offered no reaction to her unwavering care. He was grateful nonetheless.

Upon reaching his bedroom she opened the door for him, and then followed him inside, shutting it behind her. Her back now braced to it, arms crossed her chest in a serious pose. She watched him struggle to shrug off his Jedi robe, refusing the pangs in her belly to assist him. His shoulder had to be painfully tender. Take him into your loving arms and care for him, her heart pleaded. But her hurt pride left her cold. There was another war brewing, only now it was between them alone. One she feared she couldn’t stop if she tried.

Anakin noted that Padme hadn’t vacated her place against the door since they arrived in his room. She made to move to join him or aid him in any way. Whatever goodwill he felt out on the observation deck had vanished. “I don’t suppose saying I’m sorry will be adequate this time?”

“Even if you meant it the damage is done.”

Her vocal expression was carefully frigid and hard. Humility would serve him best here. Coming around to face her again, Anakin exhaled deeply before offering her what she deserved. “I’m sorry, Padme”

Having expected his apology, Padme hated that she didn't truly believe him. "Why did you do it?"

The answer to that was a far more complicated explanation than this. "I feared for your safety."

Taking a cautious step forward, Padme swallowed deeply, hating they were even having this conversation. "My life has been in danger since I was twelve years old. I learned how to pilot a spacecraft and fire a blaster by the time I was thirteen. I have known how to take care of myself even when I was Queen and protected by guards. I am as capable a person under those situations as anyone you know, and this is not news to you."

She continued, "I don't fear those cowards. I don't fear what they want to do to me. I want them to see my face and hear my voice and know they do not scare me. Furthermore, I want the people of Naboo to take heed of that fact so that they themselves would not fear those cowards. You, of all people showed me such disrespect by simply dismissing my wishes and putting me to sleep as if I were a child. That is unacceptable behavior I will not ever tolerate again."

Venomous best described the fire in her eyes, as her feelings held the immense weight of her sense of betrayal. Anakin drew upon his patience and love for her to try and explain his motives. "I couldn't go after the Queen and protect you at the same time, Padme. And while you are very capable of protecting yourself you are not a soldier. What if the attack force wasn't some wombat crew like the Draconian Horseman but a full on galactic hit squad like the Zulk Guard or the Vanine Marauders? They are far more experienced than anything you have come up against. And you would have been in infinitely more danger. While I admire your courage there are still elements you are not prepared for."

Padme took a step closer, practically snarling at her husband. "There are far greater ways of making the point you just made than using your powers against me and forcing your will upon me," she declared with a steady, unblinking stare. "You took my choice away from me. ME! Your wife and the woman you claim to love more than your own life."

"I do!" Anakin shouted in defense, then breathed a moment later to calm himself. "But you don't seem to understand, Padme Those people were trying to kill you."

"Don't you dare say that to me. I know very well that there are people who want me dead. My issue isn't with that knowledge but your complete disregard of my opinion. I am no flunky or Padawan who can simply be told to go stand in the corner. I am no domestic wallflower who sits around and waits for her big strong husband to fix all her problems. I tackle things head on, and even if I'm wrong you need to talk to me about it and not simply decide for me what is best."

"I have the utmost respect for you as a woman and my wife, but you need to understand how I feel as a man and a husband." Grazing his left hand over his face as his own frustration mounted, Anakin addressed her. "While I respect women to the fullest degree and always have as I was raised by an incredible woman, I am your husband. I feel like I am your protector even though you can protect yourself. I want to be your champion and stand in front of anything that might hurt you. When you speak of those who want to hurt you I want to hunt them down and annihilate them all."

Turning his back on her, Anakin's fists clenched at his sides, his heart pounding. "I am off fighting this Force-forsaken war hundreds of thousands of miles way from you. I'm never home to take care of you. To look after you and make sure you're alright. I'm never around when I hear new threats reported by the HoloNet or when people are arrested attempting to break into your apartment. I am never around to deal with those people. So for once I wanted to go after them and make them know what fear I live with each and every day of my life. The fear that I'll lose my life if I lost you."

His eyes found hers once more, his voice softer now. "You are my life, Padme. As flawed as I am, maybe even more so than you realized, I only wanted to make sure you would be safe."

"Your primary reasoning is beautiful, but your motives are without thought," Padme conveyed as she felt the gulf between them widening. Before, their differences made them stronger. But now she felt they were sending a warning she never expected. "I demand your complete respect."

"Respect?!" Anakin hissed, his eyes narrowed as if she had the nerve to think she didn't already have it along with his very soul. "Need I remind you of how I am denied the simple luxury of sleeping next to my wife while in this house? How is that for respect? That I have to sit by while men are paraded in front of you to garner your romantic attention, and I can't even speak up as your husband. How is that for respect? I can't even hold your hand in public. Please don't talk to me about respect. I am denied it daily," he sneered at her.

"I am denied just as much as you are, Anakin." She was well aware the effect of her using his first name that way would have. He looked as if he had been slapped. "I didn't ask my parents to invite men to this dinner party nor do I enjoy being away from you at night."

"You still allow it," he countered angrily. "You talk of respect while ignoring my apology yet where is the apology I am due for going along with your lies as I would have no part of them if it were up to me. Damn the consequences! But I go along with all of this because you asked me to. I would like to be respected by your family as your husband, but I am denied that. I would love to hear your true name spoken out loud, but I am denied that too. All because you want to protect my place in the Jedi Order and your position as Senator."

Taken aback, Padme felt crushed by his assumption. She prayed for their sake she was wrong. "Are you trying to say I place our careers over our marriage?"

"I have told you many times I do not care about the Jedi Order or attaining mastery as much as I love you. I have offered to walk away from all of this madness numerous time. You haven't... not even once."

"So I don't love you enough, is that it?" she questioned with fresh tears in her eyes, and ice penetrating her heart. "Do you truly feel that way?"

"We're here, aren't we, Ms. Naberrie."

Padme's face became frozen in a mask of appalled horror. Her dear love for him was indistinguishable from her breathing, so integral to her life. To have it doubted caused her chest to tighten painfully, her eyes darkened with raw pain. Tears fell that he made no move to wipe away. The gesture wouldn't have been appreciated anyway.

Fixing him with a steady, unblinking stare, her tone was as sharp as a blade. "I'm sorry that duty means so little to you. And I am so sorry that serving the people who cannot help themselves doesn't compare to running off together as if life is some fairy tale. Perhaps you need to wake up and see that sometimes sacrifice is required to perform our sworn duty, and that reason alone is why I have not walked away from my post."

The hard expression Anakin wore matched her own as Padme held his gaze. "You have hurt me today... more than anyone ever has before." Suddenly his face emotionally broke before her, expression and soul, pained as if she had tore his heart out. She knew the feeling. "Go ahead, Anakin. Insult me with your defense."

"I won't defend anything I said or did today," Anakin stated in an anger-sparked tone of voice. "If you are unable to see any point of view other than your own then that speaks volumes. My error in dismissing you as you put it was only because I wanted to protect you. You're everything to me. Damn my duty and your post as Senator. Damn it all. After almost three years haven't we earned anything that is truly ours? Haven't I earned the respect due a husband?"

"What about the respect I am due as your wife?"

"Ask me to put you first," he began circling her slowly. 'Ask me to throw away this so called title 'Chosen One'. Ask me to leave the Jedi Order behind and all the lies and deceit. Go ahead and ask me what in the universe means more to me than you.' Coming around before her again, he leaned in close. "You can't."

Padme swallowed deeply. "Ignoring my reasons why I won't run away with you doesn't devalue their meaning. Perhaps if you absorbed the true meaning of being a Jedi, the dedicated selfless duty to the Republic, you might understand why the lies and deceit that hurts us both must remain in place."

"Selfless dedicated duty as you call it is why I have fought on the front lines of a war for nearly three years while you and the other Senators point fingers at each other and the Chancellor. You see the death on the HoloNet, but I see it in real time. So don't preach to me about duty. I perform it in whatever way is called for and have risked my life more times than I can count. I respect duty, but only if that duty yields results that actually stop people from dying. Anything else is only talk."

Dipping her head momentarily, Padme's throat constricted hard as she barely found the voice to ask, "So you truly feel I don't love you as much as I love my career?"

"Do you truly feel I don't respect you at all?"

Standing face to face, they were at an impossible impasse. Both were hurting badly and unable to convey that at the heart of this they only wanted to belong to each other. Pride, self-righteousness and the ability to excuse actions for what is perceived as the greater good left them broken.

So much was said that couldn't be taken back.

"I need some space," Padme told him, looking away as she backed toward the door, brushing her tears away. "I've had my things moved to a guest room on the first floor. Right now I need... I just need time to think."

Anakin longed to take her into his arms, wipe away her tears and profess his love to her endlessly. But this argument had been a long time coming, and even when he apologized she seemed unfazed by his motives. In the back of his mind he feared he handled this all wrong, but for the life of him how could she not see any fault of her own? His heart did not win out this time. "I'll see you in the morning."

There really wasn't anything left to say.

Padme was out the door the moment his eyes rose to catch it shutting behind her.

The silence was deafening.

Three Hours Later

A restful, soothing sleep, much like everything else in Anakin Skywalker's chaotic life, seemed just out of his reach.

Entering the kitchen area on a weary sigh, he flicked his wrist to use the Force to brighten the ceiling's lights. Alone, as the staff had taken their leave for the night, he reached for a chair at the small table, wincing as the pain in his right shoulder flared. It seemed everything hurt tonight, both body and soul.

What was worse, the muted sense of nothingness that was once an emotionally shared connection with Padme underscored how truly fractured they were. It was as if she'd coldly cut him off from her, boldly making her point that he'd hurt her terribly.

There was a desperate war waging within Anakin's heart. Prideful to the last, he was unable to bring himself to go to her. All the while wishing that, just for once, she would seek him out with a compassionate tone of apology.

Hadn't he suffered too?

Well, at the very least he could sate life's most basic need. Lifting his left arm, he opened the refrigeration unit and began removing thin slices of Valerian meat, cheese, crusty Wrye bread, and sandwich toppings. Upon catching sight of that last slice of frosted Braddle cake in the back, he knew he'd be making acquaintances with that as well before the night was done.

Even standing upright came with no small amount of pain as he turned to set his supplies down on the table. Groaning to himself, his right shoulder simply was not complying with any movement at all. Meditation during the war often helped him drive pain away, but tonight he simply couldn't will it to happen. Nothing seemed to be going his way tonight.

"Might I join you?"

Lifting his gaze, Anakin found Jobal watching him carefully, a sympathetic note carried in her lovely brown eyes. "Of course, Milady. I... I couldn't sleep and felt hungry, so..." Feeling a bit bashful, he lost his train of thought.

"I hope I didn't startle you," she began, and then added, "If you would prefer to be alone I would understand. It's been a trying day to say the least."

“No... no,” he bowed graciously. “Your presence wouldn’t disturb me at all. In fact, I’ve found the quiet to be a terrible conversationalist,” he managed a small bit of humor.

The poor dear, Jobal thought to herself as she approached him. He looked absolutely exhausted, hurt, and heartbroken. Shadows haunted his clear blue eyes. The kind that spoke volumes about the distress weighing on a man’s soul. “Anakin, you are injured. Please sit. I can prepare you something to eat.”

“Milady, I couldn’t trouble you at such a late hour. I assure you I am quite capa...”

“Sit.”

How did an order sound so affectionate? Truly Padme was her daughter as she often had the same effect on him. Doing as he was told, Anakin sat down at the oval table while Jobal retrieved the things she needed. Without acknowledging a request for anything in particular, she removed far more items than he had and began making sandwiches that she cut in half. “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Anakin. But I am only making sandwiches,” she chided him gently, offering a dear smile. “I have done this countless times for every member of my family, so doing it for you feels natural.”

As normal and every day as this was, Anakin couldn’t help but feel better because someone was caring for him, no matter how simple the gesture. Dark times of war made moments like these all the more special.

Especially when one wasn’t certain if he’d live long enough to be made to feel that way again.

Remembering something most important that she had wanted to say to him since he arrived unexpectedly, Jobal’s gaze swept over him tenderly. “Anakin, I never got the chance to tell you how truly sorry I was to hear of your mother’s passing. From that Padme has shared with me she was a strong, wonderful, caring woman. I regret having never met her and, I grieve for your loss.”

Motionless at the table, Anakin’s head bowed slowly, once more reminded of his beloved mother and of how she was no longer with him. “Thank you, Mrs. Naberrie.”

Jobal considered the stark contrast between the powerful, brash Jedi the HoloNet christened [The Hero Without Fear] and the weary, saddened young man before her. He was spoken of across the galaxy with awe of his abilities. The Chosen One of the Force, a war hero before he was even twenty-five standard years old. A man who would someday become the most powerful Jedi the universe had ever seen, but here tonight he looked like he needed a hug far more than a legacy.

“We’re you having trouble sleeping?” she asked, reaching into the cabinet above the sink. “I could make us some Bewersq Tea? That always helps me when I’m restless. Or when Ruwee is snoring too loudly.”

“Milady, you’re too kind,” Anakin said. “If it wouldn’t be to much trouble...”

“Say no more, Anakin.”

Jobal was as sweet a woman as Padme had always told him. She gave freely, offering kindness and compassion to everyone she met. She was a beautiful light in the darkness that was the current state of the universe. She reminded him of his own mother. So much so her caring hurt as much as it healed. “Were you restless tonight as well?”

While preparing the tea, Jobal shook her head, “No, not especially. But I’ve always been keen on checking on my loved ones after a trying experience.” Wearing a loving expression, she graced him and added, “You are one of my daughter’s dearest friends, a hero to the people of Naboo now twice over, and a young man I happen to admire and like a great deal. I love you, Anakin. And I just wanted to check on you and make sure you were alright.”

With a half smile curving his mouth, Anakin felt such a warming radiance coming from Jobal. And this was a time he sorely needed that. “You humble me.”

“You deserve it.”

At least someone felt he deserved something, Anakin thought to himself. And then Jobal sat down before him a plate of double-stacked sandwiches that looked so delicious his stomach growled happily, albeit a bit embarrassingly. “Excuse me,” he offered apologetically.

Jobal chuckled, resting a comforting hand on his left shoulder. “Think nothing of it. That sound shows appreciation of a cook’s efforts. I take it as a compliment.” She poured him a cup of the amber colored tea and then one for herself.

Taking the seat across from him, Jobal watched him devour the sandwiches as if they might get up and run from him. The amusing sight was comical to say the least, and all too domestic. If the Force had ever blessed her with a son she would have wanted one like Anakin. He was charming in his modest lack of table manners. Handsome and daring and... even a bit innocent, something she was sure her daughter found enthralling. This amazing young man had captured her daughter’s heart, a fact that pleased the mother in her.

Because Anakin Skywalker was a good man. Flawed as they all were, but good nonetheless.

“Anakin, forgive me if I’m prying, but Padme has never spoken about your father.” She watched him pause suddenly, and then rake his flesh hand through his thick hair as if searching for some elusive answer. She suddenly hoped she hadn’t offended him.

“I wouldn’t know where to begin explaining that, Mrs. Naberrie. But in all honesty I never knew him in any way. That answer carries mysteries I’m not sure I will ever solve or that I truly even want too.”

Anakin looked so bereft as Jobal studied him over a cup of steaming tea. Perhaps some questions didn’t require answers as the end result was the man before her. “Your mother did an incredible job raising you under overwhelmingly harsh circumstances.” She shook her head in respect. “A toast to her. May she rest in peace.” Raising her glass, she found Anakin motionless, staring straight ahead.

“I failed her,” was all he said, spoken softly, tinged in the most bitter regret.

Jobal looked him straight in the eyes, and then reached and clasped his flesh hand in hers. “No, you exalt her with your every good deed and action. You honor her whenever you

protect or save someone's life. The galaxy praises Shmi Skywalker's love as it made you who you are today."

Having not asked why he responded the way he did, Anakin was sure Padme shared with Jobal the events of his mother's death. But certainly not afterward. His chest tightened with anguish over the uncontrollable rage that he unleashed on the sand people. His voice trembled as the emotions fell over him in waves of fresh grief. "I... I have shamed her with my actions as well."

Jobal squeezed his hand, offering what Shmi couldn't. "Perfection does not exist in this galaxy, Anakin. But forgiveness... it is the absolute most powerful thing we can offer another person and ourselves. No one misdeed or mistake damns your soul for all eternity. Rise above it. Regret it. And then move on for the better of yourself and others. And when your day comes to be one with the Force see that the tally for the good you've done far outweighs your failures."

Sighing, Anakin was sure Jobal had no clue the dear gift she was giving him tonight. The paternal balm to his tortured soul. He exhaled softly, brushing crumbs from his chin. "The sandwiches were delicious. Thank you."

"You are most welcome," Jobal accepted, releasing his hand. 'It's not often I entertain a Jedi Knight in my kitchen,' she smiled at him before turning serious as he seemed open enough to talk now. "I couldn't help but to notice that my daughter had her personal things moved to another guest room." He gave a slow, careful nod, No doubt attempting to hide how that made him feel. If only he knew that he wasn't hiding his love for Padme at all. "Is there anything you would like to talk about?"

It wasn't her business, and yet who had he ever to talk to about Padme in any way, shape or form? Artoo just didn't count and that wasn't even a funny thought. "We had a severe disagreement this evening over something I did earlier, and she needs a bit of space from my presence at this time."

A very calculated, cautious answer. She'd almost applaud his performance if she didn't recognize how hurt he was. "I see."

"I just..." Anakin started to say before reminding himself of who he was speaking too. But the feelings erupted anyway. 'I only wanted to protect her, not disrespect her,' he breathed. "I never wanted to hurt her in any way. But I may have acted rash and without thought."

A lovers spat for certain. Jobal nodded accordingly, listening and watching as he opened like a flower blooming, unaware of all that he revealed without saying. "She knows you as you know her, faults and all. These things pass in time. Apologies can pave the way for reconciliation."

[I don't believe I'm the only one at fault.■

"I never thought that you were," she replied. "Anakin, Padme can be as stubborn as they come, and at times will only listen to herself. I love my child endlessly, but I am not oblivious to her, shall we say, imperfections."

His attempt not to smile failed miserably, further spurred on by Jobal's infectious smirk. "I never wanted to hurt her."

“And I am sure she never wanted to hurt you either.”

Jobal’s compassion and understanding left Anakin in awe of her. He sensed her caring was sincere... loving even. That meant the world to him. “Perhaps a short time of space will do us good.”

“Perhaps,” she nodded. “But not too long. Fights come and go, but hurt feelings can turn into bitterness. Take whatever time you two need and then work it out. Trust me, everything will be fine.”

Genuinely feeling better, and a bit sleepy, Anakin spoke before he realized it. “I love her,” whispered at the end, but not taken back. When his eyes rose he found neither shock nor worry on Jobal’s face. Only acceptance.

“As she loves you,” was her only reply.

Anakin knew not to say more. With a gentle wave of his hand the dish and both cups lifted from the table into the sink. Jobal watched with fascination.

“Now that would be quite helpful around here,” she smiled, standing when Anakin yawned. “You need your sleep, dear.”

Rising to his feet, he towered over her as she stood before him, giving him the once over much the same way his mother did when he were a child. “I cannot repay you for your kindness and compassion tonight, milady. I was in dire need, I’m afraid.”

Drawing him into her arms, she hugged him tightly. Her final words for the evening were meant to convey everything he need know about her, the Nabberie family, and Padme.

“You are home, Anakin. Goodnight. Sleep well.”

He watched her walk away and smiled despite the days events. Hope helped a man sleep at night. He now had a little of that to work with.

“Varykino”

One of the Nabberie family home located in Lake Country Retreat

Just after sunrise

Naboo

At last the lonely darkness of night faded, giving way to the light of a brand new day.

Walking across the shaded balcony in the far west corner of Varykino, Padme breathed deeply Naboo’s clean, fresh air. Enjoying the gentle lake breeze, the warm permacrete beneath her bare feet reminded her of so many fond childhood memories. Chasing and being chased by her sister and their pets for hours without end as it seemed as though their energy, innocence, and jubilation were boundless.

But all of that paled in comparison to the dearest, sweetest memory this gorgeous shaded balcony held.

Padme was married here.

The alluring grandeur of the sparkling lake waters and rising sun above the mountainous vista in the distance only complimented the serenity of the day she took Anakin as her husband. Upon closing her eyes, she fondly recalled that warm evening when they exchanged their forbidden vows, the most momentous event of her entire life. Being crowned the Queen of Naboo in the Theed's Royal Public Square, in front of tens of thousands of people, seemed so painfully small when matched against becoming Anakin Skywalker's wife.

Which only made the dire assumptions he said to her last night cut so sharply into her heart.

Padme hugged her arms around herself, gazing out over the lake as she struggled to make sense of the one area of her life she couldn't live without. Unfortunately, Anakin felt otherwise, asserting that perhaps she held something as secondary as her career above her marriage to him. That her love for him didn't measure up to his for her because she wouldn't walk away from her duty to be with him.

He felt disrespected as a man and a husband.

Logically speaking, she had him dead to rights in terms of his mistakes yesterday. But the feeling of failing him as a wife crippled something inside her as he had the ability to hurt her worse than anyone ever could. Her education, political fearlessness, and thick skin when dealing with the overbearing bastards who sometimes talked down to her in the Senate were her sword and shield in that arena. She understood the insanity of that battleground and its combatants.

But there were no relationship schools or classes to take. Padme had such little experience with men it bordered on nothing, and in the way of adult relationships Anakin was her first in every respect. She had to consider mistakes would be made on both their parts. That was to be expected.

Undeniably, Padme missed him so much last night. Their time together was precious as they enjoyed so little of it. And yet last night Anakin was physically hurt and saddened by the thought that she didn't love him enough, and all she could do was rail on him about her own anger and feelings of betrayal. They were both to blame for a host of things and last night was an argument that was inevitable had Anakin did what he did or not.

Wasted time wasn't something she accepted in her professional life or personal, especially when she had so little of the latter. The problem was she knew what he wanted, and she knew what she felt was best. What compromise could they reach if neither were willing to give an inch?

"Excuse me, Milady."

Anakin's familiar voice surprised her. Upon turning around Padme found him standing at the balcony's entrance. He looked far better than he did last night, but still too haggard and worn to have gained a good night's sleep. She immediately wanted to take care of him. "You did not disturb me."

Sans shoes Padme appeared even smaller than she already was, and almost too beautiful to look at by sunrise. Deciding to give her what she asked for last night, he set about his way.

Offering a respectful nod, Anakin walked past her toward a small clearing up ahead.

"Ani, wait," Padme called out, and then watched him stop, his back still to her. No doubt he was going to meditate, but he could have done that in his room or anywhere else on the large estate. Some part of her felt he was drawn here the same way she was. To a place that meant the world to both of them.

And then her voice fell silent, still as the calm waters below. She hated feeling uncertain about how to fix things between them.

Giving her ample time to say something, Anakin nevertheless accepted her request as a small opening. "How did you sleep last night?"

"I didn't," she answered quickly. "I read a book and then... I was restless. Our argument... I couldn't sleep."

Having no choice but to go to her, Anakin found himself by her side a moment later. All alone he ached to draw her in his arms and soothe any frustration that claimed her. But the gulf between them was still there. "Neither could I. But thanks to your mother I was able to relax and at least meditate for a while."

"My mother?"

He nodded. "I went to the kitchen for something to eat late last night, and she discovered me. She was very kind when we talked. She said a lot of things I needed to hear."

The words were spoken before she could temper them properly. "What did you tell her?"

Suddenly Anakin's jaw tightened, as if he couldn't believe what she was insinuating. "Are you worried I told her the truth about us?" Padme bowed her head, and then shook it, her eyes glistening as she seemed so uncertain of herself this morning. He knew the feeling well. "We talked; that's all. Trust me; your secrets are in still intact."

"Our secrets."

"Not ours, yours," he fiercely amended, and then lowered his tone to one befitting who she was. He could be angry with her, but never raise his voice to her. "Padme, I have only wanted two things in my entire life. To free my mother from a life of slavery and spend my life with you. It seems I'm denied both."

Reaching out to him, Padme laid her open palm over his heart, moving in closer. "I only wish to spend my life with you as well. The dream of that is almost the only thing that gets me through the harsh days without you."

"It doesn't have to be a dream, Padme." Part of him felt annoyed he even had to remind her of that. "We make our own reality."

"But we do have a duty to the Republic, Ani. The jobs we perform matter to so many people." She saw his gaze waver, and so she caressed his cheek with her other hand, gently bringing him back to her. 'I am so sorry that I offended you and made you feel I value anything above you. Trust in your heart that I do not. You are my beloved, and I am forever yours.' His expression softened that instant, a small smile gently curling his lips. She hoped what she said next wouldn't erase that bit of progress. "Even though those are the truths of my life, selfless service gives me, and I think anyone who performs it, such a wealth of

character and compassion for others who need us to perform our sworn duties. It is fulfilling work to my soul.”

Covering the hand over his heart with his own, Anakin stared into her lovely brown eyes and accepted once more this was the woman he loved and married. Not the one he wished saw the galaxy the way he did, but this one. This complicated, spectacular woman. She was who she was, like he was who he is was.

His right arm snaked around her slender waist, drawing her body flush against his. He bent towards her ear, nudging her thick, curly hair aside and whispered something so silly and yet so sexy her knees trembled.

“I heard somewhere that vigorous love making did wonders for aiding the healing process of a bruised shoulder.”

Tipping his chin playfully, Padme arched a brow, titling her head. “For the man who once told me he was haunted by the kiss I should have never given him, and that his heart was beating, hoping my kiss would not become a scar... well, I expected something a bit more dramatic.”

“I swear I’ll regain my legendary poetic stature once I’ve had some sleep, angel.” Cupping the back of her head in a tender gesture, he drew her to him, and then his lips gently grazed hers. “How about we forget yesterday, accept we’re both at fault, and go back to my room for a morning filled with aggressive negotiations?”

Boldly not caring if anyone saw them, Padme kissed him hard and passionate. “What’s left to negotiate?”

“Oh, I have a couple of key positions I want to debate,” he danced over her lips, capturing them once more. He loved how after nearly three years of marriage and all they had done intimately, he could still make her blush. “Woman, do not make me hoist you over my shoulder and carry you to my bed.”

“You wouldn’t!” His eyes told her he would.

“Don’t tempt me, milady.”

All at once their attention was drawn to four Republic Transport ships flying overhead flanking “The Republic Blade,” the Supreme Chancellors personal starship. Then the unmistakable sound of C-3PO’s approaching caught their notice.

“Sir, milady. Pardon me for interrupting, but we have just received a transmission that the Supreme Chancellor was visiting secretly on Naboo and wished to check on Anakin personally after hearing about the attack at Theed Palace,” the golden droid reported in his usual nervous tone. Padme’s scowl at the mere mention of that man was yet another issue she had with her husband. One that might never be resolved fully. “In addition, milady. Three gentleman invited to the dinner in your honor two days from now have arrived by boat. Your father wishes your presence to greet them.”

Yet again Anakin felt waves of disrespect fall over him. “Thank you, 3PO.” Claspings Padme’s hand, he gave it a squeeze. “Angel, tell your parents about us and end this farce at once.”

“Is that an order?”

“No, no, I didn’t meant it that way. But surely you must see that there is no reason for us to continue to lie to them. Yes, we should continue our duty until the war ends, but we are here on Naboo with your whole family and this is the perfect time to tell them.”

“Ani, listen.” Saying those words alone caused him to loosen his grasp, releasing her hand as she was disappointed yet again. She suddenly felt hollow inside. ‘There is a time and a place for telling my parents, and we shall. But right now may not be the time.’ Sighing, she offered, “Can we please discuss this later?”

“No” Anakin replied quietly, backing away. “You’ll always find some excuse.”

“I just want to talk about this some more.”

“And I’m tired of listening,” he bowed before her. “Good day, milady.”

Padme watched him walk away, hurt by her yet again. Her voice failed her to stop him.

The silence was deafening.

The End of Chapter 4

Chapter 5: Parental guidance comes in differing forms from Palpatine and Jobal, while dinner party turns into a night neither Anakin nor Padme will ever forget.

Finale

Title: “The Ties That Bind”
Chapter 5

The Finale

Written by: Shawn

Summary: The Final Chapter: Parental guidance comes in differing forms from Palpatine and Jobal, while the dinner party thrown in Padme’s honor turns into a night the Skywalker’s will ever forget. At last the truth about their marriage is revealed to the Nabberie family.

Category: Drama/Romance

Rated: M for all that it implies.

Ship: Anakin and Padme Skywalker

Timeline: I’ve always believed the Clone Wars lasted about three and a half years. This story takes place at the two and a half year mark. So it’s been two and a half years since PA were married. None of her family know about the nuptials.

Disclaimer: GL owns everything.

Beta Read by: The Dark Lord of the pen, Master Anne bows respectfully

Authors Notes 1: At the end of the day life is all about family.

“We’ve got this gift of love, but love is like a precious plant. You can’t just accept it and leave it in the cupboard or just think it’s going to get on by itself. You’ve got to keep watering it. You’ve got to really look after it and nurture it.” John Lennon

“Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs. Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes. Being vexed, a sea nourished with lovers’ tears. What is it else? A madness most discreet, a choking gall and a preserving sweet.” William Shakespeare

“Family quarrels have a total bitterness unmatched by others. Yet it sometimes happens that they also have a kind of tang, a pleasantness beneath the unpleasantness, based on the tacit understanding that this is not for keeps; that any limb you climb out on will still be there later for you to climb back.” Mignon McLaughlin, *The Neurotic’s Notebook*, 1960

“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.” Jane Howard

“Varykino”

A stone path leading through the garden

One of the Nabberie family home’s located in Lake Country Retreat

Early morning

Naboo

“Guards, leave us,” Palpatine ordered with a mildly deeper than usual voice, and then without a parting glance over his shoulder several crimson-clad Red Guard faded behind the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic. Walking with a withering hand over Anakin’s shoulder, his voice suddenly filled with a great deal of fatherly affection. “Son, you were magnificent yesterday.”

As a flock of Garcian Birds flew quietly overhead, Anakin tamed the emerging smile that curled his lips, seeking to convey maturity in his mentor’s eyes. Still, it wasn’t often Obi-Wan acknowledged his accomplishments with compliments. It was a nice feeling to have that for once. “As a Jedi, I was only performing my sworn duty to the Republic. No more, no less.”

Palpatine gave something of a modest laugh, sensing the Jedi was repeating a phrase he’d heard before, probably from his Master, rather than echoing his own feelings. “Anakin, what you did in infiltrating Theed castle from an underwater location, defeating those deadly assassins, and then saving Queen Jamilla was the stuff of legends. At least allow yourself a moments glory over the good you’ve done. And don’t let anyone make you feel guilty for it.”

Stopping momentarily over a small pebble-stone bridge overlooking Varykino’s magnificent garden, Anakin cast his eyes over the sheer beauty of Naboo and sighed. “I don’t seek fame, Chancellor.”

“Greatness rarely does,” Palpatine replied with the utmost authority and then a gentle expression. Anakin’s mood seemed to lift, as was his goal while in the young mans presence. “So tell me about the attack?”

Anakin began detailing what he witnessed and what he learned from interrogating those captured after yesterdays attempted assassination. Palpatine listened intently. “Someone hired the Draconian Horsemen to assassinate the Queen and Senator Amidala. Whoever hired them had direct access to the Castle renovation schedule, security protocols, and knowledge that Senator Amidala might be visiting.”

Palpatine’s gaze intensified. “There’s a rat in the Queen’s nest, Anakin,” he pointed out. “Such information reeks of an inside job.”

“I agree.”

Closing his eyes to a warm Naboo breeze, Palpatine seemingly enjoyed the world he once called home. “I shall have a talk with Queen Jamilla personally. Where there is power, treachery and betrayal will follow. She must double and triple-check her inner circle to weed out who helped her would-be assassins.”

Nodding, Anakin added, “As for Senator Amidala, how anyone knew of her trip here is beyond me. I trust her inner circle completely and can’t imagine any of them betraying her.” The Supreme Chancellor was quiet beside him. “I fear the new technology being used these

days. All those advanced listening devices and miniature holocams the size of a writing pen are dangerous.”

“Perhaps a more in-depth techno sweep of her personal starship, apartment, and office would be in order. I can have the finest of my security team look into it if you want?”

Anakin was humbled by the offer. “Chancellor, that would be wonderful. Thank you. Assuring her safety would ease my soul.”

Pleased that Anakin would so easily accept his aid, Palpatine gestured for them to continue their quiet walk. “We must, above all else, protect those we love.”

“I wish everyone saw it that way,” Anakin noted with no small amount of wistfulness as they entered a winding path through the garden.

Palpatine turned to Anakin. “How are you doing, son?”

“Outside of a few bumps and bruises, I’m fine.”

“No, Anakin.” Palpatine drew Anakin’s attention by stopping just behind him. His arms crossed his chest to convey how serious he was. “I mean how are you really doing?”

Obi-Wan, for all that his master had taught him, never knew him the way Palpatine did. Perhaps the Supreme Chancellor sensed exactly what was troubling him because he cared enough to ask and not simply brush his feelings aside with yet more Jedi rhetoric on self-control. “Just before I left for Theed Palace I did something to Sen... to Padme,” he amended as he felt there was no need to hide the intimacy of using her first name with him. He began to explain his actions, detail his reasons, and express his guilt minus regret for doing what he felt was best.

Mindful of Palpatine’s silent reaction thus far, Anakin patiently awaited his thoughts. “I was protecting her...”

Hands clad behind his back, Palpatine began a methodical journey around Anakin, considering his words carefully, taking his own dear time before offering his estimation. He gave the impression that he cared enough about what Anakin revealed to fully think it over before speaking. Stopping before the Jedi, he smiled while placing his hands on Anakin’s shoulders. “My boy, you have done well,” he began a nod. “Her pride may have been hurt, and so you will have to work to amend that and soothe her feelings. But better her pride taking a fall than losing her life.”

Anakin exhaled. “I wish you could tell her that.”

“Perhaps the day will yet again come where she trusts me enough to be her friend. Alas, that day may be far off indeed as the war rages on.” Palpatine stood tall, his stature as regal as any king... any emperor would portray himself. “There are times, Anakin, when we must do what is best for our loved ones, even though at that time they don’t recognize the gift of our leadership. We must be bold and strong in our convictions for time will judge us righteously in the end. Trust in that and your feelings.”

Palpatine continued, “What you did yesterday, in risking your life to save Queen Jamilla’s was a good thing. What you did to Padme was for her own good, no matter the means. Better

her angry and alive then dead with you bearing the guilt of inactivity and grief on your shoulders.”

“Why can’t she see the error in her own ways?” Anakin asked unconscious of how much he may have subtly revealed with his outburst, all the while respectful enough of the Chancellors instinct that his secret probably was figured out years ago. “I do not understand women, your excellency.”

From the very pit of his lungs came a hearty laugh as Palpatine regarded the young man with such amusement. “Not even your most ancient, most well hidden Jedi archives possess the answer to that eternal question. Rest assured in neither of our lifetimes will we unravel such a mystery as is a woman.”

Sincerely feeling better, Anakin hugged his mentor. “Thank you.”

“Son, I am here for you, always. I only want to see you reach your full potential, unhindered by the jealous sway of those who secretly fear your power.” A daring rise grew within his voice. ‘The attackers would have killed Padme. They would have ripped her from your arms and left her lifeless body for the galaxy to mourn.’ Such delicious rage and anguish swept of Anakin through the Force. Palpatine delighted in it. “But you are powerful and decisive. You act for the good of the people you love. That is your greatest weapon. Right and wrong are opposing viewpoints the fearful squabble over while the innocent suffer. But you, my son. You will lead rather than follow. You will achieve rather than be held back by those unable to acknowledge your greatness. And you will save the lives of your dearly beloved... by any means necessary.”

Anakin’s chest swelled with pride as the respect he craved was given to him by the single most powerful individual in the galaxy. His heart needed a father-figure to unburden his worries and give the wisdom of his years. And then he smiled widely and teased, “So I take it you really don’t know how to explain women, do you?”

“It appears even my highly regarded intellect has its limits,” Palpatine offered humbly, smiling. And then saw two small children watching them from behind a tree. They attempted to hide when they were noticed. “Anakin, I think the little ones are seeking your attention. I won’t trouble you any longer. I just needed to see for myself that you were alright.”

While firmly shaking the Supreme Chancellors hand, Anakin saw his nieces attempting to hide their presence from them. “Padme’s nieces have taken a liking to me, and I them.”

“Then enjoy their youthful exuberance, Knight Skywalker.” Palpatine bowed, and then began backing away. “And make peace with Padme. She belongs by your side. She is far greater ally than any Jedi, I fear. She truly cares about your well being. May the Force be with you.”

“May the Force be with you, your excellency,” Anakin bowed respectfully, and then zoomed so fast, using the Force, behind that tree that the girls didn’t even see him move. “Boo!”

“Aiiihhh!” Both Ryoo and Pooja jumped, shrieking loudly when they saw their uncle appear seemingly out of nowhere.

Barely standing to her uncle's hip, the youngest of Sola's daughter pointed at him. "That was not funny." Pooja pouted, as she was known to do, and then was swept off her feet along with her sister in Anakin's arms, who peppered them with kisses before setting them back on their feet. "Okay, I forgive you. But no more scaring us."

Laughing against her uncle, Ryoo clung to his Jedi robe. "Pooja, you were so scared you turned red."

"Did not."

"Did too!"

"Did not. I just jumped a little."

"You screamed."

"So did you."

"But not as loudly as you."

"Ladies," Anakin interrupted, and then took each of their hands in his own. They were such sweethearts. 'There will be no fighting. I was just teasing you. I'm sorry, alright.' They both nodded their forgiveness and hugged him. "Good. So what mischief are my favorite little girls up to this morning?"

"Uhm, we were looking for you," Ryoo announced as they began taking a walk. "We overheard our mother talking to Papa about something bad happening yesterday and that you were hurt. Are you hurt, Uncle Ani?"

They were young and unprepared to fully understand so much. He sought to ease their fears. "I'm perfectly fine, milady." Ryoo's face lit up magically.

Meanwhile, Pooja gently poked his stomach with her middle finger. "He didn't fall apart."

"His head looks on straight."

"No one took a bite out of him"

'And that's a very good thing,' Anakin joked, thoroughly enjoying their company. This was life to his heart. Being on Naboo minus the responsibilities of a Jedi. Here, he was simply a man with his family. With the children he was family to them and nothing was hidden. Their presence soothed him like only one other could. "Whatever mischief are 'we' to get into this morning, ladies?"

Pooja ducked her head, looking both ways before whispering, "But Aunt Padme says we can't use you for our nefarisis means any more."

"Nefarious," Ryoo proudly corrected her younger sister. "I think it means bad." Pooja shrugged.

Kneeling between them, Anakin lowered his voice, grinning. "What do you want me to do?"

The trio huddled, plotting their nefarious next caper.

“Varykino”

North terrace of the estate

One of the Nabberie family home’s located in Lake Country

Retreat

Morning

Naboo

For Padme, the soothingly warm lake breeze ruffling her thick brown hair was as welcome a feeling as the sight of the Republic Blade starship, and its military escort vessels, ascending into the distant skyline and then bursting through clouds into outer space. Good riddance, she thought to herself. With her small hands resting on the terrace railing, her regal poise and posture silently defied the departure of the Supreme Chancellor, a man she was growing to more than dislike as the war and his bullying politics continued.

To make matters worse, Palpatine’s keen interest and strong friendship with Anakin troubled her greatly. She feared dire consequences were inevitable where that was concerned.

Sighing, she exhaled a deep breath, wishing to banish all thoughts of Palpatine from her mind. Days ago she arrived here to enjoy a much needed vacation with her family and was overjoyed to have her husband with her. Missing him for months at a time left her craving his presence, and to enjoy that with her family was a blessing she’d been looking forward to for some time now. Returning to her home world of Naboo awakened feelings of peace and joy within her whenever she was able to visit. But yesterday’s attack at Theed Palace, the undeniable knowledge that she was a target as well, and her bitter argument with Anakin revealed a deep fracture in their marriage. Issues that have been long overlooked have surfaced and could no longer be ignored.

In her opinion, Anakin betrayed her yesterday. Deeply so. In a marriage based on trust and equality, she felt he denied her both, as well as her say in matters of the utmost importance. With a somber gaze cast over the beautiful shimmering lake her hands balled into fists at her side, frustration clouding her face. Her heart ached over being hurt by the man she loved above all else.

And yet, that very term wasn’t shared by her husband. Causing a creeping sense of failure to boil inside her belly over their marriage. His accusations burned her to the core. Padme would have laughed if she wasn’t struck so powerfully by the mere notion he was correct in his assessment. Nothing in all the galaxy compared to her love for him. Nothing ever could. She’d give away every single credit of her vast fortune and fame for him in a heartbeat, but the dedication and character that gave purpose to her life left her unable to fathom throwing away the ability to help the helpless for the selfish joy they’d steal by leaving everything behind.

Her head and her heart were at war just as surely as the galaxy was.

Padme lived with a secret belief, that to her, meant everything. There was a sincere part of her that felt Anakin was so important to the whole galaxy that she willingly sacrificed her happiness in the now for a future where she was sure he would triumph over the Sith, and

then her reward would be a life where she was his universe. But deep down she knew that she already was, and there was guilt, no matter how thrilling the emotion, in that knowledge.

Anakin's profound friendship with Palpatine, his intense need to fix things no matter what, coupled with her belief that her way is the only way, and the numerous lies they were forced to live with were taking an immense toll on Padme. Again, she suffered quietly. As alone as she often was in her apartment on Coruscant. Alone when news broke of the war, her heart withholding its beat until she heard that Anakin was alright. Utterly alone if he died out there...

"By the Force, if I ever lost him..." softly escaped Padme's lips in barely a hush, a tremble shuddering over her body. Shaking her head, she pressed her hand over her mouth, her eyes misting ever so lightly.

As the sun's brilliant light danced across the lake, Jobal kept silent vigil over her daughter from the entryway. Careful to observe rather than act, it was obvious the emotional pain her child was dealing with. The mother in her wanted to rush in to save the day, but Padme was a stubborn one. Dealing with her required a certain deft touch. Thankfully, Jobal wasn't clueless as to what was crushing her daughter's spirit. "Dear, come in to have a bit more to eat. You barely touched your breakfast this morning."

Padme listened to her mother's beloved voice and the soft sound of footsteps closing in. "I'm afraid I don't have much in the way of an appetite this morning." Looking to Jobal when she joined her side, Padme offered a smile she hoped would disarm her worry. "I didn't sleep very well. I'm sure I'll make up for breakfast with a late lunch."

Padme's brown eyes were restless and somber, her face missing the sunrise smile Jobal so loved. If her daughter were younger she would demand to be told what was troubling her. But she was a grown, educated woman now. In every way, Jobal surmised as the days of considering her daughter innocent and naive were in the distant past. "You seem... edgy."

Ducking the subject, Padme switched gears, slightly. "Anakin told me about your talk last night."

"Did he now?" Jobal replied warmly. "Are you angry that he told me all of your secrets?"

Her mother, ever the family patriarch, was as clever as they come. Padme was sure she got that from her. "I abhor secrets."

"That doesn't mean one doesn't have them." Jobal was careful to enjoy the paradise of their surroundings, giving her daughter just enough space... for now. "Anakin is a remarkable man."

"Who sometimes thinks he knows what is right for everyone."

"And that is different from you, how?" Stifling a laugh as Padme's face took on a petulant expression reminiscent of those she wore as a child, Jobal continued, "You are often one who feels her way is the only way as well."

Hugging herself lightly, Padme offered, "I have never forced my will upon anyone."

"So I take it Anakin forced his will upon you?"

“He...” and then she stalled herself, cautious in dealing with the skills of a very intelligent, probing mother. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s something, Padme.” Deciding the time was now, Jobal took up one of her daughter’s hands lightly, holding it. “Something deeply personal is troubling you, and I want to help. You are my child and that will never change no matter your political stature or power. I love you, and I can tell you are not yourself right now. Trust that your secrets are forever safe with me. And that I would never, ever judge you. I am your mother, and I will be until the end of time.”

Padme hesitated, and then marveled at her mother’s ability to calm, disarm, and guilt-trip her all at the same time she made her feel so loved. Smiling to herself, she figured Jobal would have made a great politician. She was certainly the very best mother. Even still, there were aspects of her life Padme felt she wouldn’t understand. “The attack at Theed palace yesterday. We know for a fact that I was a target along with the Queen. That means somehow someone knew I was traveling to Naboo. They guessed my precise whereabouts, but knew that I was on the planet. That means I have a breach where my personal security is concerned.”

Jobal’s stare grew serious. “Do you think I am a fool, Padme?”

“Mother, of course not.”

“Then do not pretend to be troubled by an attempt on your life. We very well know that is my cross to bear, not yours. You have dealt with threats before, and have handled them accordingly. That is not what is bothering you right now, and we both know it.”

Feeling things were hitting far to close to home, Padme gently released her hand, turning away as her feelings threatened to overwhelm her. The lies and deception were weighing heavily on her subconscious. As was the fact that Anakin wasn’t sure of her love. When she felt ready to crumble, that very moment she found herself enveloped in her mother’s paternal embrace. For all her vaunted strength and self-reliance, the woman in her needed her mother as tears fell upon her cheek against her will.

Finally, Jobal thought to herself while holding her daughter. “I know that you love him, dearest.” No reply, though she expected as much. “And I know that he loves you with all his heart and soul. He doesn’t try to hide the affection he feels for you when you are around. His eyes betray his adoration. As do your own.”

Speechless, Padme held her peace while embraced by her mother. She was slowly turned around to face her.

“Whatever the complexity of your relationship, that is your business. But do not think a mother doesn’t know when her child is in love. And do not pretend that she can stand by and do nothing when her child is in pain. She can’t. So allow me to give you some woman to woman advice.”

“Mother...”

A pointed finger silenced Padme. Jobal gently grasped her shoulders. “Men are the most imperfect creatures in all the galaxy.” Ahh, there was that sunrise smile she lived for. ‘But we are no less imperfect, just more practical and rational.’ That earned her a gentle laugh. “I have

seen you with him, and it is a thing of beauty how you have blossomed. I would have never wished for you a mirthless man missing even a trace of daring. There's a fire within him that won't allow a dull moment, and every woman needs that. But he is young and to be trained like all men, so patience is a virtue."

Padme verbally neither confirmed nor denied her mother's claims, although at this point her silence answered all.

"There's a balance in relationships, Padme. A careful, fragile balance where there are times we must compromise, ask for forgiveness and be forgiven. No one is perfect or right all the time. Everyone makes mistakes. Now if Anakin has made a grievous error in judgment recently, then he should apologize and understand how that made you feel. But you yourself must take a good, hard look in the mirror. What hand have you played in the demise of things? In what personal ways have you hurt him?"

Jobal continued, "Do not think your father and I have had a perfect relationship free from mistakes and conflicts. We are as human as any couple, only the personal business of our relationship is just that, personal. I don't need to know the inner workings of what you and Anakin share. But as your mother I do need to pass along the wisdom of one who's traveled the road you are on. Relationships are about compromise, Padme. Without that they can wither and die. Anakin might be the Chosen One who will bring balance to the Force, but you are the Chosen One who can bring balance to your relationship."

Jobal sighed, taking a careful step away. Padme's tears were gone, and she seemed better, no matter her silence. Her resolve was back in place, as was a spark of understanding in her eyes. "This dinner we are having. Allow me to cancel it. Your father has invited, amongst close friends of the family, a couple of single gentleman who are all interested in you. Surely you don't want to go through with this?"

Padme moved to hug her mother dearly, hoping to convey just how much she appreciated her. "Trust that I love you more than you will ever know, and that your words are exactly what I needed to hear. But to say that what Anakin and I share is complex... that barely scratches the surface. For now the dinner must go on, but rest assured I shall make things right."

Jobal couldn't ask for anything more. "Alright dear, I trust you. I may not understand you fully, but I do trust you. And I trust your Anakin." Padme made no attempt to deny that claim, much to Jobal's chagrin. "He is a remarkably sexy man."

Padme swallowed hard. "Mother, do not ruin this wonderful moment with such talk."

Jobal smiled brightly. "You're blushing."

Ignoring that bit of truth, Padme cast her hopeful gaze over the Lake Country, with its thick green grass, rolling hills, and the sparkling lake she so loved as a child. It was at that very moment she recognized a small row boat coming to shore with Anakin, Pooja, and Ryoo aboard. Her husband was rowing when they docked, and then exited the boat, helping the children ashore. Pooja was holding a thick brown blanket of sorts... that seemed to be moving. "Whatever are they..."

"Oh, I believe this is the culmination of their latest nefarious plot," Jobal laughed. "I overheard my grandchildren talking in a closet this morning about a trade they were making

with three other children on one of the small islands. Apparently they're trading three dolls, a holo-picture frame, and twenty credits for a Delorion cat. They have been pestering Sola for a new pet for weeks now and have seem to take matters in their own hands. What is it about the women in this family that they can so easily keep a secret." Her curiously teasing gaze fixed upon her daughter.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Padme declared while keeping a close eye on her husband and nieces. The nefarious trio stopped to unfold the blanket and sure enough, a small black Delorion kitten poked its cute little head out. "Are you going to intervene?"

Jobal gave a modest wave of her hand. "No. They are enjoying their sisterhood and time alone with their new best friend. Rest assured they will slip up before the day is out, and then they will pay. For now, I'll allow this trespass."

Padme leaned over and brushed a kiss over her mother's cheek, and then turned towards the railing and yelled as loudly as she could, "I'M GONNA TELL!!" The trio cast their gaze towards her, while she was pointing at them. Ryoo and Pooja's faces were priceless looks of shock, and then they were gone as Anakin Force-ran them in a blur away. "I'M STILL GONNA TELL!!"

Jobal shook her head, walking away with a smile. "Children indeed."

"Varykino"

One of the Nabberie family home's located in Lake Country Retreat

Outside the main dining hall

Early evening

Naboo

As Teckla and Nandi excused themselves to finish the final preparations for tonight's dinner celebration, Ruwee regarded his complex wife with a most curious expression. Her private suggestion, just now whispered in his ear, was the last thing he expected to hear. "The dinner party that you helped put together, you now want to cancel at the very last moment? What brought this on?"

Unwilling to speak of her Padme's personal life, and the secrets that came with it, Jobal navigated tough waters. "I fear we've worked against Padme's best interest by essentially putting her on display tonight in hopes of finding her a suitor. My judgment in the matter has wavered, and I think canceling tonight's dinner would be for the best. Or perhaps simply sending our guests home and having a family-only affair?"

"Our guests have arrived already and sending them away would be in poor taste," Ruwee countered, and then gazed at his wife. "Dear, is there something I need to be made aware of? Has something taken place that you makes you want to cancel the dinner?"

The worry in his eyes caused her to briefly caress his cheek. Padme's silence during their talk earlier today was a confession unto itself, and Jobal would not betray that. Not even to her beloved husband. "No, things are as they were. I just worry that we have made certain assumptions about Padme that we should not have and that she would be better served by allowing her to live her own life minus our interference."

Ruwee kissed his wife's cheek, taking her hand in his. "Dear, outside of a fabulous meal with a few good friends, Padme will meet and greet three gentlemen. If no sparks fly the world won't end. Trust me, I shall not play matchmaker. The evening will evolve according to her wishes. Remember, all that we have done is put a few good men before her. If none capture her attention then so be it."

Despite her inability to argue his points, lest she arouse his further suspicion, Jobal nodded. Nonetheless, she felt tonight's dinner had the makings of a colossal disaster. "Alright then. Things shall go as planned. And I could use a glass of Zolor brandy... as the night to come may call for more than one."

"As could I," Ruwee noted with a smile. They were soon interrupted by the sound of Paddy Accu's voice as he announced the arrival of their guests. "And so it begins."

"Mr. and Mrs. Nabberie, it is a pleasure to meet you." Milas Vahn extended a firm handshake to Ruwee, and then bowed before kissing Jobal's hand in greeting. Possessing short dark hair and even darker eyes, the rich heir and current operations chief of Vahn Intergalactic Imports, Naboo's biggest shipping company, spoke of his surprise and gratitude over being invited to tonight's dinner in honor of the Senator. He added that he held a great deal of respect not only for Padme's political views and accomplishments, but of her business savvy as well. Tall and confident, he dressed for success and looked the part as he was immaculately attired from head to toe. Jobal had to admit to herself he was a fine specimen of man and seemed well spoken and sincere despite his vast wealth.

Next, the Nabberie's greeted Dr. Syne Kel, who brought a dozen fresh long-stemmed Gossa roses as a gift. Jobal worked with his father some years ago in social programs that aided the underprivileged, and commented in a teasing manner on Syne's uncanny resemblance to his father. Articulate to a grand degree, the doctor had a very good sense of humor, joking that he'd never found his father particularly good looking. That earned him a round of laughter from all around them. His warm smile and emerald-green eyes conveyed a genuineness that impressed Ruwee. He admitted a certain nervousness at meeting the former Queen, but was eager to enjoy her company for the evening and most grateful for the offer. His gentle nature was something Jobal instantly liked about him.

Last, but certainly not least was the arrival of someone Ruwee and Jobal met a long time ago when Padme entered the Legislative Youth Program. Palo hugged both of them on sight, genuinely pleased to see them again. It was easy to see that the acclaimed painter they knew as a boy, was now all grown up and assured of himself. He regarded the other gentlemen with a knowing nod, as they had all been told that the Senator was single. His past with her gave even at least a modest edge, or so he hoped.

Palo's celebrity status on Naboo was well known, and he seemed comfortable with it to a degree Jobal wasn't sure she liked. Though harmless enough, he seemed to lack that thrilling something a woman required in a man. Still, he was sweet in recalling a funny story from Padme's youth and remembered more than a few things about the Nabberie's to be able to ask them about their family. He was especially looking forward to seeing Padme again, as they had only exchanged a couple of holo-mails over the years.

All talk ceased when the guest of honor appeared at the top of the immaculately-decorated staircase. Dressed in a stylishly sleek V-neck black evening gown that screamed seduction,

Padme was a vision of beauty as she slowly descended the stairs. She wore her thick brown hair down in luxurious curls, complimented by a shimmering tear-drop jewel around her neck. The more than appreciative stares of the men gathered below gave her reason enough to smile, although she didn't dress to kill for them. A certain moody Jedi craved her like the air he breathed whenever she wore all black, and she had every intention of torturing him throughout dinner and then pleasuring him all night long afterward. There was work to be done in her marriage and once order was restored all would be forgiven. For now though, she'd play the part of the lonely, single Senator in desperate need of a social life and a man in her bed.

Later on she would passionately ravage a certain Jedi-husband until he couldn't think straight, ensuring he would never, ever again question he was her heart's truest desire and the most important person to her in all the galaxy.

Upon reaching the bottom of the staircase Padme gave a quick appraisal of the male-herd brought before her. The mere thought of which she found amusing for some reason. Milas was handsome indeed, but she'd heard about how much and often he got around the Naboo social circles with various women. Not for her at all, but probably good for a sizable charitable donation to a worthy cause by night's end. Syne now, he had beautiful eyes and dimples. She was well aware of his hard work for the underprivileged in the poorer districts around Naboo. While admirable, he lacked any sort of danger about him. He seemed easily conquerable, lacking any ability to enrage her... or to captivate. He had the potential to be a girl's good friend and no more.

And she needed much, much more.

Palo, well, he still owned those dreamy eyes and that dark, curly hair of his. He'd grown up nicely in her estimation, but she's found a bit of arrogance about him unbecoming in some of his interviews. He seemed to enjoy the limelight in a less than humble fashion, no matter that he was truly talented. Still, he was a pleasant reminder of her innocent youth when she had just discovered boys and what kissing was. "Thank you all for coming. Although I don't know the faces, I look forward to making your acquaintance. I want everyone to relax and enjoy themselves this evening. This isn't a state affair, it's a dinner party. Please enjoy the feast I'm sure my mother has worked very hard to help prepare. No one ever leaves our house hungry is her motto. Entertaining conversation and endless refills of wine glasses should ensure a most enjoyable evening."

One by one introductions were made, as Padme switched roles from guest of honor to hostess. She greeted each of the men warmly, exchanged a brief bit of conversation, and then moved on to the next. Palo was last, giving her an impromptu hug that went on a bit longer than she felt was necessary. She sensed the other men's jealousy toward him, as well as his uncaring attitude toward them. Nonetheless, they were ushered into the main dining hall as more guests arrived.

Sio Bibble and his wife arrived next, with apologies from the Queen as there were still emergency meetings going on concerning yesterday's attack. Padme understood, hugging the former Governor while engaging him in conversation over his thoughts concerning the attack. He gave her his concerns and theories as they walked for a moment, and then she saw him into the main dining hall before rejoining her mother. Together, they greeted Zsu and Sali Wesq, dear friends of the Nabberie family for many years now.

Soon after the Nabberie women were alone again.

Taking her daughter softly by the shoulder into a nearby corner, Jobal whispered, "If you would like to fake a illness to get out of this, I bet we could call the whole thing off."

Finding it necessary to needle her mother, Padme lifted her hand over her chest as if she were appalled. "Mother, that would be lying."

"You're a politician dear. Surely you are well versed in the art." Padme's mock of a shocked expression amused Jobal to no end. "I'm not sure if going through with tonight is the wisest course of action."

Understanding where she was coming from, Padme pulled her mother into a deep hug. "Trust that your dear words today struck home and that I will make everything right. I love you more than words can say."

Jobal had little choice but to trust her daughter. "I love you as well. I just hope you know what you're doing."

"Padme Amidala, you are truly a sight for sore eyes."

Upon hearing that most familiar Southern Naboo accent, Padme found one of her oldest and dearest friends, as well as former college dorm-mate, Cass Echo striding towards her. "Now this is truly a surprise," Padme happily noted, and then quickly embraced her, again reminded of just how tall she was. Standing at five foot ten, Cass was statuesque in height, never mind possessing the slender figure of a Coruscant model. Her long, fiery red locks and fair complexion were as lovely as Padme remembered. She still carried with her hazel eyes a carefree spark. "Its so good to see you again, Cass. What has it been? Two or three years?"

"Nearly four, my dear. But we've both been busy, so no one is to blame." Offering a polite greeting to Jobal, the elder Nabberie gave the women a few moments alone. 'I was floored when I received the invitation, Padme. You never return home for your birthday or festivals, so when the opportunity came to see tonight I just had to attend.' Taking a step back, Cass appraised her longtime friend. "You look amazing. I never would have guessed you would wear such a... wicked instrument of male manipulation."

Cass's effervescent smirk said it all. She was as blunt as she was a bad girl with a good heart. Padme sorely missed her when their careers led them in vastly opposite directions. "I've changed over the years, Cass. I am no longer the saintly wallflower you so mercilessly teased once upon a time."

"Thank goodness for that. You have blossomed into not only one of the most feared politicians in the galaxy, but a beautiful a woman as well. Praise the Force you are finally out of your former Queen attire," she laughed good-natured at Padme's expense. "One could not tell if you were a woman at all, you were so covered in heavy make up and layers of clothing."

"Perhaps I should have been more like you and made sure the boys knew what was under my clothes every chance I got?"

"If I didn't love you so I'd take that as an insult. And if you had then you would have enjoyed allot more fun." Their back and forth rapport was the same as it had always been. Whenever they were together, a fun time as had by all. "How have you been, Padme?"

“Aside from yesterday’s unfortunate events, I’m fine. Just doing my best in the Senate to end this atrocious war. And I’m overjoyed to be home with my family. How are you?”

“Well, I haven’t killed anyone at the Banking Union, so that’s a plus,” she noted in her usual flair. ‘I’m fine, just overworked and in need of a good, strong man to spend a couple of wild, sweaty nights with.’ Casting her gaze around, Cass leaned in and whispered, “I do hope your good friend will be attending tonight’s festivities?”

Padme blinked. “Good friend?”

“That deviously handsome Force’s gift to women, Anakin Skywalker... now he would be one amazing mountain to climb.”

Suddenly, Padme wanted to push Cass off that mountain and fire at blaster at her while she fell, but kept her unsavory emotions in check. Her jealousy flared hot, so fast it surprised her, and it was coming from a good friend who if she knew that Anakin had someone wouldn’t dare make a pass at him. Still, the wife in her wanted a pound of flesh for the comment alone. “Yes, my good friend should be here any...” And then he was there, standing before them, having arrived as quiet as a whisper on the wind.

Clad in a full black Jedi robe, Anakin slowly withdrew his hood, hands clasped before him. He looked the very definition of dark power, passion, and danger. Though he regarded them both, he only acknowledged Padme. “Milady.”

Cass’s facial expression screamed she would eat him alive and serve at the foot of his bed. She quickly shook her head free and then gently nudged Padme.

Stuttering briefly, Padme introduced, “Good evening, Anakin. This is Cass Echo. I think I mentioned her to you once or twice.”

“A friend from college, I believe.” Anakin took Cass’s right hand and brushed a soft kiss over it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Can I have your chil...”

“Cass, please show yourself in and have a glass of wine,” Padme quickly ushered her off. ‘I’ll be in shortly.’ Cass departed, offering a wildly flirtatious wink at Anakin. “She tends to come on strong.”

“Since she believes she was flirting with a single man, can she be blamed?”

Issues between them lately came down to that and that alone. Padme quietly leaned into him, settling her hand over his chest. “Dear, I love you. And I want us to talk after dinner is over with.”

“That I even have to endure this evening is an insult.”

“It is one dinner that I ask for, and then we shall mend things between us. Again, I do apologize for asking you to do this.” Padme felt, despite the frustration she was putting him through that he found her attire most pleasing. She smiled as his feelings were laid bare before her. “I will make this up to you.”

“How?” Her invasion into his personal space left him momentarily breathless.

“By giving you what you deserve.”

Anakin watched her walk away, eying the seductive sway of her gorgeous backside. Tonight was going to test him in ways Obi-Wan could only dream of. If he could get through the evening without killing someone then perhaps he truly was destined to bring the Force back into balance.

If not, then heads would roll.

Literally.

“... so in runs little Padme screaming that we all had to come outside quick. She had something awesome to show us, and we had to see it right now,” Sola regaled the guests with a story she was sure Padme, judging from her death-glare, didn’t particularly want to be told. Alas, it was a universal right that all older sisters got to torture their younger siblings. “So I ran outside after her with our parents following us. That was when our esteemed Senator led us over a small hill to a stretch of grassy land that Shaaks graze. When we arrived my dear sister began jumping up and down while pointing at two Shaak’s in particular, shouting that one was trying to... how did she put it, jump over the other from behind, but could never seem to do it. She told us it looked very determined.”

The humorous roar around the table caused Padme to blush, never mind the youthful innocence the story conveyed. She silently swore sisterly vengeance on Sola someday when she least expected it.

Sola so enjoyed the spotlight when she could rib her sister. “My poor mother raced toward Padme, put her hand over her eyes and drug her away while my father simply shook his head at the scene. Suffice to say, that one Shaak never quite leapt over its friend, but he seemed to be smiling after the effort.”

[Now that was utterly charming, “Cass chimed in, enjoying the chance to tease her good friend.” Tell me, dear Padme? Did you ever get the chance to see a Shaak leap another from behind?”

Taking off her heel and throwing it just wasn’t proper etiquette for a former Queen and current Republic Senator. “Cass, would you like me to show you the door?” Snickers around the table as she said it wearing a smile. The single-fingered gesture that was her friend’s reply made Padme roll her eyes as laughter settled around them. All the while she felt Anakin’s warm and tender gaze, wishing it were not from across the length of the table, but right next to her. Unfortunately, Palo held that seat. And he seemed to enjoy the nearness far more than she did.

While Milas and Syne had been perfect gentlemen despite their obvious romantic interest in her, Padme found Palo’s constant need to lean over and whisper something in her ear a bit annoying. He seemed to think that their brief and platonic flirtation during their past gave him some sort of added intimacy. She could tell her mother, sister, and Cass recognized her mild discomfort. Anakin was not pleased at all, and her worry escalated when she saw that his light saber was with him. Nothing good could come of that.

At least the wine was excellent. And the feast looked and smelled magnificent.

No matter the circumstances surrounding tonight's dinner, Jobal was pleased as friendly conversations broke out around the double-pedastle dining table during the first course of dinner. Seated between Anakin and her husband, she admired the newly remodeled main dining hall. Adorned with a truly magnificent floral arrangement, antique Pilar vases, a massive wood-burning fireplace, and original artwork by a truly talented painter who was a dear friend of the family, she felt it gave off a warm sense of home despite the luxury.

Just across the table, Sio, his wife and Milas were engaged in a serious discussion over recent export restrictions placed on key off-world Naboo contacts by Palpatine's administration. Syne enjoyed a few words with Padme over an outbreak of Lunas disease in the northern hemisphere that relief efforts were only now getting under control. Palo found new fans in Zsu and Sali. He was more than happy to discuss his work and when his next art showing would be.

While keeping careful watch over Ruwee's sneaky attempt to secretly eat something Jobal knew wasn't good for his digestive system, she noted Anakin's utter boredom and frustration with even being here. She liked him the very first time she met him, but now she considered him family, and felt she had an understanding of him that caused her to care even more. Especially now that he'd captured her daughter's heart. But for a man accustomed to the front lines of war in recent times, a social dinner party probably didn't appeal to him at all. Add into that a couple of men who all had designs on the woman he loved... She leaned into him. "How are you this evening, Anakin?"

Taking a moment to wipe his mouth with a napkin, he offered, "I'm fine, Milady."

"You seemed bored."

She already had the ability to see through his facade. "This is not how I usually spend my evenings."

"Well, we are honored by your presence, and you are most welcome in our home at any time," Jobal declared sincerely, holding his gaze a moment. He seemed very appreciative. 'And I'll have you know this,' she began, and then lowered her voice for his ears alone, "I tried to cancel this dinner at the last minute."

"May I ask why?"

Jobal calmly favored him. "Well, you may ask."

Lips curling into a smile, Anakin couldn't help enjoying the quietly clever mother of his beloved. She was a refreshing change from Obi-Wan. He hadn't realized until coming here how badly he needed someone in his corner on a more personal level. "So what do you think of the men seeking to ensnare your daughter?"

Jobal studied him closely, and then drank from her wine glass. "I consider her already ensnared," she noted while looking away. Anakin neither confirmed nor denied a thing, not that she expected otherwise. "I saw that you brought your light saber to dinner tonight. May I ask why?"

His eyes slowly swept over the three men seated at the dining table, and then settled on Jobal. "Well, you may ask." She laughed softly and he considered the sound delightful. "I thought that if you ran out of knives I would have something to cut my meat with."

“Or perhaps cut through the loud aroma of Palo’s cologne.” They shared a chuckle, and then Anakin gave a slow nod. Suddenly, his eyes darted toward Padme with such possessive tenderness Jobal found herself dying to know how long he’d loved her, and how their relationship came about. That thought fled her mind the moment she caught sight out of the corner of her eye her mischievous husband using her conversation with the Jedi to reach for the tray of Norsian Crisp pasta. A favorite of his, but not the best thing for his body considering his advancing age. He didn’t need another bad episode like last time.

Jobal gently tapped Anakin’s wrist and then pointed toward the dish Ruwee was reaching for. He seemed to gather, without a word spoken, what she wanted him to do. Mesmerized as always by one who could command the living Force, she watched the dish slowly move farther out of Ruwee’s reach until it was so far away he’d have to get up to go and retrieve it.

Padme and Sola’s laughter soon alerted the room to what was happening as Ruwee crossed his arms, glaring at his wife. “You think that was funny, don’t you?”

Jobal uttered not a sound, enjoying her dinner once more.

“Have I told you how truly amazing you look tonight?” Palo complimented in Padme’s ear while dancing with her by the crackling fireplace.

Having heard Palo mutter something, Padme was otherwise occupied with observing Cass dancing oh so closely with Anakin. Her vaunted maturity was being sorely tested in ways it never had before as she couldn’t stand the way he held her body against his, draped in his arms. Her head ached, and she wanted to drag him away from her and never look back. She was of two trains of thought as the soft music played on.

“Padme?”

For one, her rational mind knew that Anakin loved her alone and that Cass was a good person who, if she told her right this second about her marriage, would apologize profusely and then tease her mercilessly. But she’d never seen her husband with his strong arms around another woman. She’d never seen a woman with her head resting against his shoulder, her eyes shut, loving the way his warm embrace felt. Knowing her friend the way she did, Cass was no doubt entertaining thoughts of a grand conquest tonight, openly lusting after Anakin. The knowledge of which left Padme terribly uncomfortable.

When Anakin smiled at something Cass whispered in his ear, and then returned the sentiment, Padme felt a hot stab of jealousy. Her eyes widened in surprise when Palo suddenly stopped in front of her, casting a most curious stare.

“Your mind seems elsewhere?”

“I... I’m sorry, Palo. Please forgive me.” Pulling him back into their dance, the last thing Padme wanted was to cause a scene. “Perhaps the music has lulled me.”

“And here I was hoping it was me.”

“Your company is appreciated, Palo.” Unfortunately for Padme, Palo took her modest confirmation as window of opportunity. He attempted to draw her closer, into a more intimate slow dance. She politely rebuffed his attempt, and with no more than an arched brow

conveyed her meaning. He accepted without mention, and she hoped that would be his last failed attempt of the night to make more out of his invitation than a dinner party.

As for Palo, he felt the presence of her Jedi friend was probably the culprit as to why she was a bit distant. Anakin seemed the big brother type, his menacing eyes boring into him from the moment he led Padme onto the dance floor. And though she had already danced with the two other competitors for her affection, he was last and hoped to make the best impression.

Now if only that infuriating Jedi would give Padme room to breathe, Palo felt he could make a connection with the gorgeous Senator. One that would reawaken her obviously frozen heart and give him a greater piece of the spotlight than he'd ever enjoyed before.

Meanwhile, Jobal danced with her husband while keeping secret watch over Anakin and Padme. After dinner, but before dessert the guests decided to enjoy the soft music by candlelight, and so people paired off with who they came with to start, and then began pairing off for conversations sake. Anakin chose not to dance at first, but then was cornered by Cass as they were now seemingly enjoying each other's company. Jobal had no doubt where Anakin's heart lay, but maybe this was payback for tonight. Padme seemed distracted from the moment she saw them.

The young and the games that they play.

Her daughter was stubborn to an extent Jobal hadn't believed possible. Nonetheless, she had seen enough thus far. It was time for her to intervene. "Dear, could you please save Sola's feet from Sio's lack of coordination. I'd like a moment with Anakin."

"You're leaving me for the Jedi, aren't you?" Ruwee joked while brushing a kiss over her cheek.

"I think he's taken, dear."

"That's not entirely the best answer you could have given me," he smiled.

"I love you, but you're infuriating. Go." Offering her a bow of sorts, Jobal watched him walk off, and then made her way over to Cass and Anakin by the flower-trimmed windows. A polite tap on Cass's shoulder drew her attention. "Might I cut in? It's not often a woman gets the chance to dance with a Jedi."

"Certainly, Mrs. Nabberie." Cass gave a sensually lazy head-to-toe appraisal of Anakin before stepping aside. "He is a fine specimen and a skilled dancer. I can only imagine his other skills," she trailed off as Anakin took Jobal's hand.

"She's... interesting," was all Anakin could think to say.

"She's a predator and you, my dear Jedi, are the prey."

"Trust that she will never catch me."

"I do indeed." Jobal quite enjoyed his company as they danced. Sola even winked at her, ever the tease. She could easily see the allure this one possessed. Dangerous, gorgeous, and the supreme confidence he carried himself with were unmistakable. "Padme doesn't seem to be enjoying herself very much."

“It’s probably her choice in dance partners.”

“Then allow me to rectify that little problem.” Not one to sit back and watch from the sidelines, Jobal guided Anakin past the other dancing couples to where Padme and Palo were. ‘Palo, dear. I would just love to hear about your amazing new exhibit.’ She sensed that man loved to talk, especially if it were about himself. “If you don’t mind?”

“Not... not at all.” Frustration simmered over the artist’s face, but he held his tongue as he couldn’t refuse. Anakin’s presence didn’t help matters in the least. With his fate sealed he politely took Jobal’s hand, who immediately led him away almost against his will.

Wasting no time despite their differences, Anakin extended his hand. “Milady?”

Taking his hand, Padme nestled against him... home for her heart, her head resting over his chest, eyes shut, with his other hand warming the small of her back. She couldn’t care less who saw them or what anyone thought. She was with the man she loved, who she knew was still bitterly angry with her, and yet couldn’t hide his feelings. The way he breathed just over her neck, clutching her body to his, she knew his precious heart. “Would you think it unladylike if I clawed Cass’s eyes out?”

A more unPadme-like phrase, he had never heard from her before. His bright smile lived for her alone, giving him the gift of her jealousy. He warmed the shell of her ear with his breath. “You could never be unladylike, angel.”

The pleasant hum that escaped her lips found his notice as he squeezed her tighter in his arms. “I wish that I could kiss you.”

“You have only to take what is rightfully yours.”

“Soon.” She wasn’t sure he believed her, but she was dedicated to ending this farce and repairing the damage she’d done to their marriage. For the time being, she adored the man in her arms. “I see my mother has you wrapped around her little finger.”

“She’s a wonderful person.”

“And she knows that I love you beyond words.”

“Did you tell her about us?”

“No, but she’s observant to a degree I may have underestimated. And she knows that you are in love with me as well.”

“I don’t hide it. I never have.” Her silence gave way to guilt, as he felt she deserved a small bit of it. Not even the envious stares he received from the other men seeking his angel mattered as he was still upset. The only salvation was that even his anger lessened when she was in his arms, her head tucked below his chin, clinging to him and him alone. “I may have to kill Palo before the night is done?”

Her giggle was as surprising to her as it was to Anakin, that a darkly humorous joke could cause such a reaction. “He is an arrogant pest at best. Leave him be. He’ll be gone soon enough.”

“He lusts after you.”

“But I lust only for you,” Padme declared softly, and then tilted her head when the announcement that dessert as ready to be served. “If you will be patient just a little while longer, I promise everything will be the way that it should.”

“Patience isn’t one of my strong suits.” And with those parting words Anakin left Padme alone with her thoughts.

Standing with his wine glass raised high, as were all the other guests and the Nabberie family, Milas offered a toast to the guest of honor. “To Padme Amidala. Naboo’s champion. Unmatched in intelligence, character, and courage under fire. You are a shimmering jewel in the crown of our world, and a shining example to us all... And by far the most beautiful woman in the universe.” His toast drew cheers and applause while he focused his attention on the woman of the evening, favoring her with a gentlemanly nod and a little wink that made her smile.

Padme wore a gracious expression. “Thank you, Mr. Vahn.”

“Milas, milady,” he teasingly corrected the Senator, who bowed her apologies. ‘Although I wouldn’t consider you calling me husband someday an insult.’ Snickers around the table at his flirtatious comment, to which Padme gave a wave of her hand in dismissal. Still, she appeared less than offended. “Boyfriend wouldn’t be bad either.”

“Enough, Milas,” Padme laughed, mildly embarrassed. “Thank you for the toast.”

With his face set in a scowl, Anakin’s hand brushed over the handle of his light saber. Jobal gently tapped his wrist out of the sight of anyone. “People don’t ever die or leave hungry at my dinner table,” she explained in a low tone of voice, and then saw the corners of his mouth lift as he took his seat again. She exhaled as one crisis was averted.

At that very moment another began.

The rumbling pitter-patter of little feet sounded down a staircase just outside the main dining hall. Everyone’s attention peaked when the voices of children shouting at something could be heard quite clearly. As their voices grew in volume Neckla shrieked by the entrance door when something moving very fast ran over her foot.

“No, don’t go in there... Noooo!” Pooja was heard yelling frantically. Alas, she was far too late.

The collective stares of everyone at the dinning table witnessed the appearance of a small black Delorion kitten racing into the dining hall, and then leaping onto the shoulder of a bewildered Sio Bibble. The loud sound that escaped his mouth was high-pitched and far from manly, as the kitten dove onto his wife’s lap, and then ran across the backs of the chairs Sola, Darren, and Zsu occupied. Humorous chatter erupted when the animal leapt onto Milas’s head, and then the table itself. It raced towards the massive, triple-layered cake that was the center piece of dessert and leaped in the air...

And then hung there.

Anakin’s outstretched palm dangled the kitten above the cake, while the guests caught their breaths after such a surprising event. Never, ever, had an animal interrupted one of

Jobal's dinner's. She looked to the dining hall entrance where a so-very-guilty Pooja and Ryoo stood, huddled together. Their little faces screamed, "We are so dead!"

"Children, come here now," Sola demanded while watching the kitten gently descended into Anakin's hands, and then begin to lick his fingers as if he recognized the Jedi. Curious indeed. "What is the meaning of this?"

Taking the longest route possible to their mom, Ryoo and Pooja, with their heads hung low rounded the table. When they reached Sola, who's arms were crossed as she awaited an answer, they looked to each other, not sure who should speak. Luckily for them, they didn't need too.

"Sola, I'm afraid I am at fault for tonight's... four-legged entertainment," Padme half-laughed while casting her gaze at her scared nieces. "I received the Delorion kitten this afternoon as a gift and asked Pooja and Ryoo to watch after it for me until after dinner. The little rug rat must have escaped their care. I do apologize for the disturbance."

Sola glanced from her sister, to her girls and then her mother, and finally back to her girls. Mischief was afoot, but she'd let it go for now. With just a look, Darren understood they'd discuss this with the girls later. "Take Padme's gift back upstairs and keep it safe and out of the way."

The girls, overjoyed that their favorite aunt hadn't told a thing, hugged their mom, and then raced around the table to hug Padme tightly.

Ryoo whispered, "I knew you wouldn't tell. I just knew it."

Padme gave a nod, and then shoved them off. They ran to Anakin next, took the kitten and each kissed his cheek. After a quick goodbye to their dad and grandfather the children departed. Chuckles around the table over the unexpected intrusion as everyone took it in stride.

Soon after, Teckla and Nandi began serving dessert, which consisted of a slice of triple-layered Drizzle cake and two scoops of Veens ice cream. A wonderful evening thus was winding down, and for Padme, she couldn't be happier. The sooner the dinner was over with, the sooner she could fix things with Anakin. Her husband wasn't pleased with her in the least right now, and hadn't so much as looked at her in quite a while. She swallowed that bit of hurt, and then resolved herself to righting the wrongs just as soon as their guests left.

"Anakin?" Palo called out, catching the Jedi's attention. "How about you regale us with an exciting story from the front lines of the war?"

Amidst a hushed stillness around the table, Anakin sent a hard glare at Palo. "There is nothing exciting about war."

The painter could tell he struck a nerve, his intent all along. "Surely the Man Without Fear, as the HoloNet news agency so famously coined you, has had adventures that would leave us spellbound over dessert. Especially during the dark times we live in today."

"The dark times, as you put it, consist of a horrible war where millions of innocent people are dying. There are no adventures to be found or discussed for the merit of fun," Anakin noted in a sharp tone, his expression hardening. "Perhaps you have an exciting tale for us. I'm sure you've enjoyed some wild days with your paint brushes." Padme covered her mouth to

keep from laughing, while the other guests found the back and forth between the men most interesting.

Palo's agitation grew. "Forgive me, Jedi Skywalker. I create, not destroy like you and the Jedi." 'A Jedi's mandate is not to create, but to protect and serve the Republic,' Padme spoke up, much to Palo's disappointment. "I have the utmost respect for them. Especially Anakin, whose bravery and character I admire above all others."

Jobal would have applauded if it wouldn't have caused a scene. Sola nodded her agreement. Ruwee watched them both thoughtfully.

Palo's jaw tightened. "And yet the Jedi are under constant HoloNet scrutiny over rumors of corruption, lies, and the intent to deceive the Republic."

Ruwee laughed to himself, and then offered, "The same could be said for Palpatine's regime. Only in that case I'm willing to bet everything I own it's true. These are troubling times, Palo. People are suffering while others debate rumors and conspiracies. I would rather deliver food and medicine to a grieving world than learn of the criminal dealings that happen behind closed doors."

Palo lifted his hands in mock defeat, though secretly angry at how quickly Padme's family came to Anakin's defense. "Perhaps my intent was misinterpreted. It's not often I dine with a Jedi, much less one with Anakin's hero status."

"So you hoped that I would entertain you?" Anakin pinned Palo with a menacing gaze.

"Jedi can use the Force. Parlor tricks and all," Palo said while refilling with wine glass. 'Although I am not sure if one could expect anything more spectacular than lifting that kitten earlier.' That very moment his wine glass took flight from his hand, floated just over the center of the table and hung there for all to see. Then it slowly descended down to the table. Palo suddenly felt a fool as he lowered his hand by his side. "And I thought the vaunted, unseen Force you Jedi believe in were capable of so much more."

"I find your lack of faith distressing," the words rolled off Anakin's tongue. Before Palo could reply his chair suddenly lifted off the floor. His obvious discomfort was the most pleasant sight Anakin's seen all night. "If you are looking for entertainment, Palo. Allow me to grant your wish."

Palo's chair began to spin while his hands clung to the arm rests. "This is not funny."

"I'm not so sure about that," Syne interjected. "I'm quite amused by the sight of a grown man spinning in mid..." Speech failed the esteemed doctor when his chair rose from the floor. Looking around the guests below him, he smiled, "I have now floated. My life is complete."

Padme enjoyed seeing Anakin put Palo in his place until her chair began to rise. One by one, each of the guests' chairs lifted off the floor amidst gasps and cheers as they were all treated to a show of the Force. And then the dining table itself lifted, not spilling or turning over a single thing. And if the spectacle of the scene weren't amazing enough, the entire dinner table and all of the guests fully swiveled in a slow circle until everyone was sitting on the opposite side of the room they began on as each chair softly landed back on the floor.

Good-natured chatter filled the room, as well as questions about the Force and how it felt to use it. Anakin tried as best he could to accommodate everyone, answering to the best of his

ability. He enjoyed the attention, as well as the respect he was given as the dessert and conversation lifted everyone's mood.

That was until Anakin caught sight of Palo leaning over Padme's chair to tell her something privately. The painter's carnal thoughts were wide open to the Jedi, his intentions clear as day. Though Padme had zero interest in him that wasn't the point that made Anakin so irate. It was that all night long he'd had to hold his tongue while men flirted with his wife, danced with her, their eyes full of longing and desire. Their minds filled with images of his angel in their bed. Finally, he'd had enough.

Standing from his chair, Anakin declared with a bow, "Thank you for a wonderful dinner. I'm going to call it an evening. Goodnight."

Offering no more of an explanation than that, he exited the dining hall with all eyes on him.

"Excuse me," Padme quickly stated, noting Jobal's nod. She had work to do and now was the time.

Cursing her short legs, Padme chased after Anakin's long, angry stride down the dimly lit western hall of the estate. Her heart begged her to shout after him, but she couldn't find her voice no matter how hard she tried. Damn whatever those back in the dining hall thought of her abrupt departure. Her marriage was on the line, so nothing else mattered.

She had to fix this, and she had to fix this now.

Padme saw Anakin enter one of the empty guest rooms at the end of the hall. Her pursuit came to a halt just outside the partially open door. There were so many things she wanted to tell him and to make him understand. And yet she considered that perhaps the correct course of action would be to listen.

Quietly entering the small guest room, she found Anakin staring out of an open corner window, his back to her. The black Jedi cloak he wore was on the floor, obviously thrown behind him. He was ever aware of her presence, so she saw no reason to announce herself. Instead, she fed off his emotions through their shared Force-connection and felt such a powerful wave of betrayal and frustration that tears moistened her eyes. By the Force, what had she done?

On the wing tips of a deep breath, Padme braced for his fury.

"I had thought," Anakin spoke in a grim tone as the moonlit lake surrounding the estate filled his line of vision, "That it hurt when Count Dooku severed my arm. But that was nothing compared to night."

Hovering close by, Padme lowered her head as his words struck home, and then gently wiped her sad eyes.

"Those men in there... each of them desired you," he nodded, his rage barely restrained. "Each of them imagined bedding you to their hearts' content. They smiled and laughed at everything you did. They hung on your every word, each hoping for the sparkle in your eyes to favor them just once. I listened to their thoughts from the moment they saw you. I was

forced to sit there like a good little boy, holding my tongue the entire time while they danced and flirted with you in my face. I felt humiliated.”

When Anakin turned around to finally face Padme, the shadows hid his face from her. She sensed he had much more to say, and though it hurt her so badly to hear it, she knew that she had too.

“My wife...” Taking a careful step toward her, only enough to see her stricken face, Anakin shook his head in defiance of her tears. ‘I’ve spent the entire evening being disrespected. I feel betrayed by YOU!’ he shouted at her for perhaps the first time ever and even her pained expression did little to sooth his anger. “I am exhausted because of all the deception in our lives. I am surrounded by lies, and it sickens me. I feel hidden from your loved ones as if you are somehow ashamed of me.” He paused for a brief moment, breathing heavily. “If I have to keep secrets from the Jedi and the Senate, then so be it. But I shouldn’t have to with the only family I have left. And the vast majority of them don’t even know that I am family. I would rather go back to the war than live like this another day.”

Padme longed to hold him. To assure him of her absolute love, and swear that this would never happen again. But her mother’s words came back to her here. In order to make this right, she had to know exactly what she did wrong. And so she quietly held her peace, brushing aside the tears as they fell. Though he was almost within arms reach, they felt worlds apart.

Anakin’s glare drifted over her, the pain so fresh not even her sensual allure could tame it. “You made me feel unworthy because of what I had to endure tonight,” he declared through tightly clenched teeth. Padme’s hand covered her mouth as she cried before him. Her pain only amplified his own. “I’ve never been so angry with you... I don’t have anything else to say.”

Exhaling deeply, Padme gently brushed her tears aside while gathering herself. Her soft gaze followed him to the foot of the bed where he sat down, and then ran his hand slowly over his face. She recalled his apology to her over what happened yesterday, and his explanation for why he did it. She knew her anger and disappointment were valid. Her opinion stood over his mistake. She was still hurt over his actions, and yet, on some level she understood them. He was right in telling her that she should have not gone to Theed Palace with him. The danger would have been greater, and perhaps the assassins would have accomplished their goal of killing her. His methods were at fault, but his heart was in the right place.

Where was her heart tonight, she considered, while he watched these men parade around her? All of them seeking her affection and romantic interest. He suffered such disrespect, and for that she felt crushed at her hand in all this. Nonetheless, Padme Amidala did not fold when the day looked lost. She did not bow her head and allow the worst to survive for long. She was a fighter, and there was no greater battle for her than this one.

Even as her presence suffocated him, Anakin hated that the faint scent of her perfume clinging to her soft skin could wrench such a reaction from him as she invaded his personal space, standing before him now. He felt her turmoil, sadness, and regret. Felt it so strongly that all he wanted to do was take it all away so that she wouldn’t have to bear it. Even though tonight was her fault, his love for her was that absolute.

“Before we were reunited after the assassination attempt on Coruscant, I had no personal or social life at all,” Padme revealed in a measured tone voice, her arms wrapped around herself to ward off the emotional chill shivering her body. “I was running on auto-pilot, with my every waking hour dedicated to the service of Naboo and the Republic. And while I took great pride and satisfaction in the work I was doing, behind closed doors I was so lonely and incomplete that I began to feel old. Very, very old.”

Brushing a shaky hand through her hair, Padme continued. “I didn’t have a clue how to develop a social life because I was so detached from everything normal. I cherished my time as Queen, but I was an oasis unto myself. There was the business of Naboo and nothing else. No parties. No vacations. Nothing that would signal a young woman enjoying her life. When you are Queen your focus is devoted to the people, so that is what I did. And when my time was done I used to dream that I would get away from the spotlight and live like all the other girls my age. I wanted to find someone special and fall in love. I wanted to go places and do things that were fun. But once my time as Queen ended I realized that I was so out of touch with how to live like a normal person that I rushed into negotiations for the vacated Senator position. I knew how to live a structured life. I knew how to work long hours, keep my composure and focus in meetings, and deal with politicians. I understood that sort of life. So I drowned myself in it. But then you returned to my life... and I finally learned to live.”

“Ani,” she spoke his name as affectionate as a gentle kiss. “When I fell in love with you my life became bright and new. I... I didn’t know I was capable of being in love or even having a relationship. I was so woefully unprepared for you that I fought my feelings with everything that I had. But your dear heart won me over, and I thank the Force every day for that. You saved me, Ani. You saved my life and I love you more than I could ever say. But you need to understand that before you, I had no other relationships. I didn’t have any experience with a man in any way before you.”

His silence came without him even lifting his eyes to her. Nonetheless, Padme pressed on. “None of what I have done wrong is excused by my lack of experience in relationships. I guess I’m just trying to say... I’m... I’m not perfect. I sometimes only listen to the sound of my own voice. I make mistakes, and I have made a grievous one tonight. I am sorrier than I have ever been before, and I am heartbroken because I feel that I have failed you,” she cried, her face wincing painfully, her hand over her heart. “That ruins me inside.”

When her voice trembled and hitched, Anakin found he couldn’t stand not looking at her anymore. Her tears crippled something inside him as she bled her heart.

“I am so sorry that I have kept my family away from you. I am sorry that I have fought you over telling them about us. I am so proud to be your wife. You are my sunrise and sunset, Ani. I only want a life with you and could live any other way as long as I had you with me. I need you by my side,” she poured her heart to him with tears falling down her cheeks, her face stricken with sorrow. “I have felt like I was protecting you by hiding us because I think you are so very important to the Republic. I think you are destined for something so monumentally great that (it) will benefit the entire galaxy. But I went too far, and now I can only hope that you forgive me. I love you to the depths of my very soul. And I swear I will never fail you again.”

Anakin’s expression softened upon her, no longer filled with anger or resentment. His blue eyes pooled with longing, desperate to erase tonight from his memory.

Trembling as she stood between his legs, Padme felt fragile before him, awaiting his reply. "I think after breakfast tomorrow morning we should gather the family and tell them together. We will tell them everything. And I will apologize to you again in front of them. I feel you deserve that." His unwavering stare tore through her until she couldn't take it anymore. Through a fresh wave of tears her voice strained, "Ani, please..."

With intense urgency his strong hands clasped her beautiful face, bringing her soft lips to his, forcing her to straddle his thighs. The hot, visceral emotion behind his hungry kiss saw her shaking with sensation. Her husband's fiery passion left her wet and needy the second he began drinking from her lips, his arms clutching her tightly to his chest, unable to get enough of her. Her hands grabbed at his shirt, drawing him closer, craving the feel of his body against her own. Their tongues curled round and round inside her mouth, their heads gliding from side to side, inhaling the other's breath. Her dress bunched up towards her slender hips, though she barely noticed. Never had her body craved sex the way it did right now as she felt her moist center grinding over his throbbing erection, creating the most delicious friction.

By the Force, they needed to kill all the pain and anger and hurt that crossed between them in the last day.

In a quiet flash, they moved in sync. Anakin's right arm crossed her lower back, hauling her flush to his chest. He stood for a brief moment while she worked his pants down off his hips, before sitting again as they frantically kicked off their shoes. Having gone the night sans underwear to entice him, there was nothing in the way as she poised herself above the weeping tip of his thick shaft, and then slowly lowered her body until she was so full of him she swore she could feel his heart beating inside her own chest.

The entire time their gazes remained locked, sharing the raw need that threatened to overwhelm them.

"I love you," Padme promised before her lips caressed his in a brief, trembling kiss. Her arms locked around his neck as she began to ride, her hips grinding low and away, lazily impaling him inside her. Crying while making love to him, desire quivered her belly, causing her thighs to clench over his. When his lips parted with a husky moan her body liquefied around him. They were still partially-clothed, and yet he hadn't ever felt so perfect to her as he did now. She sighed pleasurably over his lips each time she slid down his cock, drew him out, and then drove him back inside deeper. "I love you so much," softly escaped her lips.

Watching Padme make love to him was a revelation of all that was good in his life. His fiery anger died a little more with every roll of her slender hips, her sex dragging and pulling him to madness. With his strong hands clutching her hips, she rode his lap in short, grinding circles until he groaned, "...my angel."

"Always," she panted, kissing his throat, over the shell of his ear and cheek, and then back to his lips, plundering them with her tongue. And when he finally fell onto his back, her hands braced his chest, her body taking him inside her with greater intensity. Her eyes squeezed shut, her body clenching around the fullness of his throbbing flesh. Up and down she moved over him tirelessly, adoring the expression of awe he wore, and the way he sighed her name.

Spiraling intense ripples of pleasure erupted when Padme threw her head back, her bottom lip caught in her teeth as the hot friction over her clit sent tremors of a blinding orgasm

coursing through her body. She bent over him, shaking, trembling, her cries muffled in the hollow of his neck as waves of pleasure tore through her. His arms held her through the longest, most satisfying climax of her entire life.

Breathing heavily over him, Padme sensed Anakin was far from through with her.

When his mouth captured hers again, Anakin moved on sheer instinct alone. He lifted them into a sitting position, shoved his pants off with his feet, and then in one fluid motion stood and drove Padme's back solid against the nearby wall. At no time had he slipped from her body, his cock pulsing inside her tight, slippery warmth.

With a sharp intake of air, Padme was mesmerized by the need to conquer shadowing his blue eyes. To claim and dominate her for all time. She felt his greed for her through their Force-connection... his possessiveness and devoted love... his borderline obsessive passion. His intense feelings made her ache for him, wanting him to know that she was his for all time and that would never, ever change.

"Take me," she boldly pleaded with him, staring into his eyes. Her legs locked further around his hips, her ankles following suit. With her back braced high to the wall, his hips began to lift her body with hard, surging thrusts that caught her breath in her throat. "Take me... fuck me... Make me never forget that I'm yours."

"Loveyousomuch... Padme... Padme, my love." Anakin's hands shaped to the sensuous curves of her backside, using the grip to surge into her harder, his hips driving her up the wall with every resounding slap of their bodies. He was lost in the exquisite feel of her... in the way she aroused him to no end. An animalistic groan fled his lungs in a rush as he was swept in the lust of her potent allure. Unable to speak, his body conveyed his thoughts with every lifting, deep thrust that ripped a cry from her lungs. He couldn't keep his eyes off the beautifully flushed expression on her face, the way her beautiful features grimaced with passion, or the way her voice hovered just above a purr.

Padme arched wildly with his bouncing, deep thrusts. The act was rougher, her legs jerking wildly, being vigorously fucked out of her mind by the man she loved. He was so big, hot, and hard inside her... taking her at his whim, giving her all that he had as his thrust rocked her body against the wall until she soared through a euphoric, writhing orgasm that shot hot sparks through her. Not for a second did Anakin stop driving her up the wall, lifting her with his pounding hips, his groans loudly ringing her ears. Kissing him hard, she begged him, "Come inside me, Ani... let go... Come inside me... please..."

What shred of self-control he had left crumbled to ashes when her request entered his mind. Wrenching her body upwards one last time, Anakin roared through a savage series of ejaculations, his essence bursting warm and wet inside her until he had nothing left to give... until his legs nearly buckled from exertion, his heart lodged somewhere in the vicinity of his throat.

Padme, for a brief instant... felt a blinding, powerful sense of the Force sweep through her twice... and then it was gone as quickly as it came.

Moments later they were cuddled on the bed, still partially clothed, eyes shut, humming peacefully as their emotional storm had passed. The raw lust of their make-up sex ended, leaving behind this softer, quieter side of their relationship. They each apologized again,

making promises in the dark that past mistakes would never return. They were on equal footing once more, and intended to stay that way.

Behind the locked door they undressed and fell asleep under the covers in each others arms, unconcerned with the thoughts and assumptions of anyone outside the bedroom. And unlike last night, a peaceful sleep was had by all.

The next day, early morning

As Ruwee sat motionless beside his wife, with the rest of the Naberie clan gathered around them in the sitting room, the silence was deafening. He stared at his youngest daughter as if seeing her for the very first time after her startling revelation. In some ways he was seeing her for the very first time, as Padme Amidala was no more than a professional title at best. Her true name, taken after marriage rites performed by a holy man, was Padme Skywalker.

By the Force itself, she was married. And to a Jedi nonetheless. Ruwee held his peace, gathering his thoughts after Padme's revealing confession moments ago.

Just after breakfast this morning Padme announced that she needed the children to leave the room, as she had something of the utmost importance to tell the family. By closely judging his wife and elder daughter's lack of surprise, coupled with Padme's abrupt exit from last night's dinner after Anakin departed, he had at least a basic idea of what he was about to hear.

Seated beside Jobal, Ruwee expected that Padme would reveal her feelings for Anakin, and obviously that the Jedi returned them. That in and of itself had the makings for chaos but certainly wasn't the end of the world. And he wondered, had he paid closer attention would he have noticed something more between them. The implications of their relationship, both personal and professional, left him reeling with worry. But as Padme began to detail a story beginning with the accursed assassination attempt on her life years ago, shock and awe claimed Jobal as well. He'd suspected she was aware of some, if not all of Padme's secret life up to this point, but apparently even she wasn't informed fully.

As a family, they sat and listened to Padme discuss the most personal aspects of her life, why they married just before the war began, and their reasons for keeping it a secret. Ruwee detested secrets and had always taught his children the eventual downfall they led too. From his daughter's lips, he was stunned to learn of the hidden life she'd lived in the shadows. Of the worry over Anakin's position as a Knight and her's as Senator. And her constant dread over a war her husband fought on the front lines.

He never wanted a soldier for her. Though his respect for their duty never wavered, he well understood the pain those left behind were forced to endure. And now his precious Padme had taken the Chosen One as her husband.

"I can only imagine how all of this sounds to you," Padme conceded with Anakin by her side, standing before the family. 'My one and only defense, of which I will never feel a day's guilt as I have lived a self-less life, is that I truly, deeply love Anakin. He completes me,' she smiled, reaching for his hand. "And he makes me very happy. I only wish I could have shared

this with you sooner. I should have, and I recognize that now. I have done my marriage and my husband a great disservice in keeping them a secret from my family.”

Turning to her husband, Padme brought her hand to his cheek, caressing it softly. “I am so sorry for keeping this secret as long as I have. I love you endlessly, and I promise to honor you and our marriage from now on.” He brushed a forgiving kiss over her lips, and then she took a deep breath and faced her parents again. Their shock hadn’t worn off just yet, as evidenced by their blank stares. “I am sorry that I didn’t share all of this with you sooner. Years ago, even. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” Jobal spoke softly as she rose from her chair and took her daughter into the comfort of her embrace, holding her tightly. “Dear, you have nothing to be forgiven for. You are an adult and well aware that all actions have consequences. Nonetheless, you sought your happiness and joy. That is all any of us can do in this life.”

Padme favored her mother with an apprehensive expression. “But I’ve lied to you all for so long.”

“Your reasons are your own,” Jobal began with such warm affection in her voice. ‘Today, you have given us such a gift,’ she smiled at Anakin. “All that a parent wants for her child is to be a good person. To live a life of high character, self-less deeds, and to reach for her goals whatever they are. You have accomplished all of those things and now have found love. There is no greater gift than to know that your child is happy and loved. So for that, I thank you and Anakin.”

Sola approached the couple next, hugging her sister first, and then Anakin. “And to think, I thought Padme was boring and unpredictable,” she teased her sister. “I have never been happier to be wrong in my entire life.”

“Thank you, sister.” For Padme, the morning’s success seemed to hinge on the thoughts and feelings of her father. Although grown and sure of her path in life, the daughter within her still sought his love and respect. He often spoke of giving her away at her wedding and was from a more traditional courtship background. Nothing about her and Anakin was traditional, except that they deeply loved each other. “Father?”

Rising slowly, his expression calmly collected without a hint of emotion, he came to his daughter, standing before her and her husband. Husband... the word was still wrapping around his mind. Never could he have imagined... such was life though. Ever evolving and different for everyone. Still, Padme’s soft brown eyes conveyed her feelings. He could always read them. Today they were filled with love and devotion for Anakin. Her days and night, minus the grueling war weren’t filled with a hollow sense of love. She had someone and was happy. It might take a while to get used to, but her heart was true. His respect for her was unshakable.

Ruwee placed his hands on Padme’s slender shoulders. His face lifted into a bright smile, and then he drew her into a comforting hug. “I knew you’d be trouble the day you were born.”

Padme laughed, exhaling a lifetime’s worth of worry. Tears filled her eyes... tears of joy. “I promise to be a bit more boring from now on.”

“Perish the thought, dear.” Ruwee kissed his daughter’s cheek, and then moved to Anakin, whom he gave a long hug too as well. His voice whispered, “Please protect her.”

“With my life, always,” Anakin replied, and then shook Ruwee’s hand. Darren shook his hand next, and then Jobal and Sola embraced him.

“Welcome to our family, Anakin,” Ruwee offered as the mood lifted, and all was well again. “We are so proud to have you.”

Family... outside of Padme he felt as if that word was meant for others. Never him. The Jedi were an institution. They were justice and truth and the protectors of the Republic. But they were not family. Not like the Nabberrie’s. For the first time in years, he felt truly at peace with himself. “Thank you.”

A light tapping noise drew their collective attention towards the terrace. Pooja and Ryoo peaked out from behind the door. “Uhm, are you all done with the older people stuff yet?” Pooja politely asked after losing a bet with her sister on who should ask.

Jobal could see the mischief in her grandchildren’s eyes already. And it wasn’t even lunchtime yet. “Whatever do you two rascals require?”

Ryoo blurted out, “Can Uncle Anakin come out and play?”

Everyone turned to the Skywalkers, who both bowed their heads, a bit bashful. Ruwee laughed, “We are truly the last to know, I see.”

“We shall all come out to play,” Sola happily reported as she led the family out onto the terrace, and then down the long flight of stairs that led to the sandy beach front by the lake.

Anakin and Padme, hand-in-hand toured along the shore, watching the children chase each other and their grandfather across the white sands. Jobal cheered her grandchildren on, while Sola and Darren held each other, enjoying the moment immensely.

The war, the Senate, Palpatine, and the Jedi Order were far removed from this paradise. There was only room for love and togetherness here. Come what may in this most dangerous, unpredictable age, this amazingly complex, and yet loving family will endure.

After all, those are the ties that bind.

The End — No Sequel

Extra special thanks to my amazing beta reader Anne, who is just the best, the fastest, and most knowledgeable Star Wars fan I have ever known. Extra special thanks also to everyone who was patient for this final chapter. I hope you enjoyed it. I had a great time writing it. On to “Beloved”